WHITE ALBUM2 Recommended Play Order

Step	Japanese Title	English Translated Title	Type	Note
1	-introductory chapter- 1周目	-introductory chapter- 1st playthrough	Game	Anime
2	雪が解け、そして雪が降るまで	The Snow Melts, And Until The Snow Falls	Sound Novel	Anime
3	祭りの前 ～ふたりの24時間～	Before The Festival ~The Two's 24 Hours~	Drama CD	
4	祭りの後 ～雪菜の三十分～	After The Festival ~Setsuna's Thirty Minutes~	Novel	
5	彼の神様、あいつの救世主	His God, Her Savior	Novel	
6	-introductory chapter- 2周目	-introductory chapter- 2nd playthrough	Game	Okay to skip already read parts
7	Twinkle Snow ～夢想～	Twinkle Snow ~Reverie~	Novel	
8	歌を忘れた偶像	The Idol Who Forgot How To Sing	Sound Novel	
9	-closing chapter- ノーマルエンド	-closing chapter- Normal Ending	Game	
10	-closing chapter- 杉浦小春 ルート	-closing chapter- Sugiura Koharu's Route	Game	
11	幸せの日～ベッドの上の物語～ 杉浦小春「通い妻の矜持」	Day Of Happiness ~A Story On The Bed~ Sugiura Koharu: The Pride Of The Commuting Wife	Sound Novel	
12	台風一過の小春日和	An Indian Summer After A Passing Typhoon	Novel	
13	-closing chapter- 和泉千晶 ノーマルエンド	-closing chapter- Izumi Chiaki's Normal Ending	Game	
14	-introductory chapter- 3周目	-introductory chapter- 3rd playthrough	Game	Okay to skip already read parts
15	祭りの日 ～舞台の下の物語～	Day Of The Festival ~Story Off Stage~	Drama CD	
16	-closing chapter- 和泉千晶 トゥルーエンド	-closing chapter- Izumi Chiaki's True Ending	Game	
17	幸せの日～ベッドの上の物語～ 和泉千晶「心温まる猥談」	Day Of Happiness ~A Story On The Bed~ Izumi Chiaki: Heart Warming Indecent Talk	Sound Novel	
18	-closing chapter- 風岡麻理 ルート	-closing chapter- Kazaoka Mari's Route	Game	
19	幸せの日～ベッドの上の物語～ 風岡麻理「10分でできること全部」	Day Of Happiness ~A Story On The Bed~ Kazaoka Mari: All That Can Be Done In 10 Minutes	Sound Novel	
20	-closing chapter- 小木曽雪菜 ルート	-closing chapter- Ogiso Setsuna's Route	Game	Quit game after credit roll
21a	一泊二日の凱旋	The Two Day And One Night Homecoming	Drama CD	Canon
21b	再会と贖罪のニューイヤー	The New Year's Of Reunion And Atonement	Drama CD	What if scenario of above
22	-coda- ノーマル	-coda- Normal Ending	Game	
23	-coda- 冬馬かずさ ノーマルエンド (浮気エンド)	-coda- Touma Kazusa's Normal Ending	Game	
24	EXTRA EPISODE 「不倶戴天の君へ」	Extra Episode: To You, My Sworn Enemy	Game	
25	-coda- 小木曽雪菜 エンド	-coda- Ogiso Setsuna's Ending	Game	
26	幸せの日～ベッドの上の物語～ 小木曽雪菜「一生分の幸せ」	Day Of Happiness ~A Story On The Bed~ Ogiso Setsuna: A Lifetime Worth of Happiness	Sound Novel	
27	ミニアフターストーリー「幸せへと進む道」	Mini After Story: The Way To Happiness	Game	
28	-coda- 冬馬かずさ トゥルーエンド	-coda- Touma Kazusa's True Ending	Game	
29	幸せの日～ベッドの上の物語～ 冬馬かずさ「忠犬はご機嫌斜め」	Day Of Happiness ~A Story On The Bed~ Touma Kazusa: The Faithful Dog Is In The Mood	Sound Novel	
30	もう、ホワイトアルバムの季節じゃない	It's No Longer The Season Of White Album	Novel	
31	ミニアフターストーリー「幸せへと戻る道」	Mini After Story: The Way Back To Happiness	Game	
32	2016年の大晦日	New Year's Eve of 2016	Drama CD	Includes voice actor comments
	届かない恋、届いた	Unattainable love, is attained	Novel	Read after anime episode 6
	雪菜姫の受難と大臣の悪巧み	Princess Setsuna's Agony And Her Minister's Conspiracy	Novel	Events of Setsuna a year before meeting Haruki

*closing chapter play order: Normal > Koharu > Chiaki Normal > Chiaki True > Mari > Setsuna
Chiaki's routes expand on Koharu's route and Normal route, so Chiaki's should not be played first
Chiaki's True expands on Chiaki's Normal, play Normal first
Mari's route points toward coda, play it second last
Setsuna's route unlocks coda, play it last

*coda play order: Normal > Kazusa Normal > Setsuna > Kazusa True
This play order ensures maximum pain and suffering

By turbos86

The Ordeals of Princess Setsuna and the Minister's Intrigues

"Secchaaaan! Would you restock the onions and bananas, please?"
"All righty!"

Summoned by her nickname shouted from the register, the girl quickly picked two cardboard boxes out of a pile nearby and carried them from the storage area into the shop.

That nickname, "Secchan," always made her cringe, but since she was the one who asked everybody to call her that, she couldn't exactly let anyone see this less-than-thrilled reaction.

"Also, while you're setting them out, will you put these time sale stickers on, too?"
"A fifty-yen discount on both, right?"
"Oh, and Secchan, once you're done with that, could you also take care of the side dish department? Use the half-off stickers!"
"Yep, will do!"

In this small grocery supermarket, everyone—not just the girl, but everyone, from the middle-aged women working part time to the manager—was busily bustling around.

When the girl exited the store, beneath the evening sky, the whole area was abuzz with activity. This was the most crowded part of the day.

The shopping district in front of Suetsugu-cho Station—compared with the next station over, at Minamisuetsugu, it was nothing big, but for this small space, there were plenty of people coming and going.

Married couples stopping by to pick up ingredients for dinner, men on the way home from work slightly early, elderly people ambling around with no clear objective or regard for the hour.

And…

"This year's entry deadline for Miss Houjou High is coming up soon, right?"
"But, I mean, it's pretty obvious Ogiso is gonna grab her second win."
"I dunno about that, this year. There's that first-year, Yanagihara, who's gaining some pretty serious ground."
"Ohhh, *that* girl. I guess I've at least heard some rumors that she's got pretty high advance reviews, but…"
"If a first-year wins two years in a row, it'll be the first time in the school's history. Apparently everyone's in an uproar about it."
"…Well, last year Ogiso was the first first-year ever to take the grand prize, so that makes sense."

"Anyway, she's got a pretty overwhelming approval rating among the first-years."
"I do think her level is pretty high, but when it comes to the 'Miss Houjou' image? Ogiso is a lot more orthodox, and it seems like it would be hard to shake the reign of last year's queen."
"Maybe you're right… At this point, it'll be difficult unless she can get the votes of the upperclassmen."
"Or unless Ogiso somehow loses the support of the second- and third-years."

The students from the Houjou University Attached High School, in the midst of an animated discussion concerning the school festival that was merely a month away.

Both Houjou University and the high school were closer to the Minamisuetsugu station, so there weren't many students passing by here at all.

"…"

Nevertheless, every time those few students—all close to her age—*did* come through, the girl turned away and stood rigidly, waiting for them to go past her.

And every time, once she confirmed from the corner of her eye that they had disappeared through the station ticket gate, she gave a sigh of relief, then resumed her work.

"'Orthodox,' they called me… Huh."

The name of this slightly suspicious, hard-working girl was Setsuna Ogiso.

Houjou High School, second year, class F.

The year before, as a first-year, she had won the title of "Miss Houjou High," and there were whispered rumors that she might carry off a second consecutive victory—this so-called "orthodox" beauty.

…Although, right now, this look of hers, with a tight braid, glasses with thick black rims, worn-out sneakers, and an apron bearing the grocery store's logo—completely unimaginable for her school self—served as the perfect disguise for detective work.

"Good morning, Setsuna!"
"Good morning, Natsumi. Is there not any morning practice for the basketball club today?"

The next morning, the usual Setsuna stood in front of the Houjou High School gate, her transformation magic having worn off… or, rather, her disguise having been removed.

She looked so lovely as she glanced over her shoulder, smiling and greeting her friends, that several male students on the way to school got caught up in staring at her and couldn't look away.

"Yeah, but instead, we're gonna play five practice games this weekend…"
"W-wow, that sounds tough."
"Our new captain is a demon, I tell you, a demon. A team like ours would never be able to break through to the district tournament, no matter how hard we tried, and yet…"
"Mizusawa-san, you mean? From class D? Whenever I watch your practices, I get the sense that she's on a different level from the rest of you."
"Oh, sorry. I guess we're all just holding her back."
"Ah, no, that's not what I… I'm sorry."
"Eh, it's fine, it's fine. I don't really think we're gonna try all that hard to reach her level anyway."
"I-I see."

That said, if one were to strain one's ears to hear her conversation with her friend, it wasn't nearly as gorgeous or erotic as the gallery all around imagined.

Nevertheless, the "Setsuna Ogiso" brand that had been built up to this point put a variety of filters over her expressions, her mannerisms, even the way she walked, and somehow gave her that "pure young lady" image.

Ever since her first year, she had been worshiped as the most beautiful girl in the whole school, and with her every move being under constant focus, everything people saw or could see about her was accepted as "how she was" from the start.

This was true today, and would likely remain true hereafter.

Yes, until Setsuna passed through the door of her own classroom…

"Wait! Wait up, Setsuna!"
"Good morning, Kanako… Why are you freaking out so much?"
"I can't help freaking out over something like this!"

As the girl herself had said, the one who rushed up to Setsuna, wearing a face of extreme panic, was Kanako Anjuu, part of her group of close friends.

Maybe she was the leader of the group, or maybe she just talked the most, but she also had a small tendency to exaggerate, and the occasional bit of tactlessness—well, there were plenty of girls like that.

"Anyway, this is terrible! Look at this!"

Kanako made a big show of presenting her cell phone to Setsuna.

Of course, what she wanted to show Setsuna was not the phone itself, but the email displayed on its screen.

"What…"

Kanako's agitation wasn't unwarranted; the email was quite disturbing to Setsuna.

sub. Fw: [BOOST] About Setsuna Ogiso, from 2-F…

The next line of text contained the sort of sensational phrasing that often accompanied emails like this—*"My friend sent me this—do you think it's true?!"*

And next, in the quoted message itself, were the standard dubious speculations and gossip—again, the same old thing when it came to this type of email.

The contents suggested suspicions that *"Setsuna Ogiso might be involved in paid dating"*—which, for Setsuna, was an absurd false accusation.

It was pure speculation, lacking any photographic evidence or concrete information about her alleged dating partners.

The single point that this baseless slander clung to was Setsuna's "disturbing" behavior patterns on a daily basis.

According to the message, every Wednesday and Friday, Setsuna Ogiso went home stealthily, without accepting any invitations or telling anybody her destination.

But on those two days, she did not in fact arrive at home until much later at night.

Nobody knew where she went or what she did in the meantime.

In other words, Wednesday and Friday must be when she had her so-called *"work shifts."*

"…"
"Whoa, this is serious."
"I mean, I guess publicity is publicity, but…"

As Kanako showed the email to their classmates, they all spoke up in indignation, one by one.

"Who the hell is spreading this nonsense around?!"

Of course, there was very little in the way of anything that would pinpoint the one who started it in the first place.

The original sender's name had long since been deleted.

Or, maybe, it had been sent in the form of a forwarded message from the beginning.

"I got this from one of the junior students in my club. Apparently it's making the rounds among the first-years…"
"First-years…"

The moment Setsuna saw the content of the message, a notion came to her of who had written it.

Not that she had a clear picture of who precisely it was, or knew their name, but it was probably one of the girls who had been following her around from time to time since last month.

She first noticed it on the Wednesday before last.

As she exited the school gate and made her way toward the grocery store, she had a strange sense that she was being watched.

At the time, she picked up her pace slightly as she passed the park, and by the time she made it to the main street, she couldn't find anyone behind her, so she just shook her head at her own excessive self-consciousness.

But then there was the second time, last Friday.

She changed her usual route, following the same path as the other students until she came to Minamisuetsugu Station, but the pair of girls kept following her, keeping a reasonable distance.

At that point, she entered her favorite karaoke club at the stationfront, then immediately left through the back door and jumped on a train.

And the third time was this Wednesday… in other words, yesterday.

She realized that the same pair were following her, took the same route as last week to Minamisuetsugu Station, and this time, she changed clothes in a restroom in the shopping center, then walked right past the two girls in her disguise and made her escape.

Based on the color of the ribbons on their uniforms as she slipped past, they must have been first-years…

"Then, this must be…"
"Yeah, I'll bet it's some of Tomo Yanagihara's hangers-on."
"Seriously? They're going this far over some informal contest…?"
"Even if they aren't really, they sure are acting like it. Why else would weird emails like this be flying around?"
"Y-yeah, huh…"

Her friends' conversation slid around inside her head.

If anything, Setsuna was less resentful of the people doing all of this, and more regretful of her own weak spot.

From the point of view of others, this might come off as arrogant, but to Setsuna, it was only natural to be made the target of others' gazes and gossip.

At this point, she couldn't help wishing she had gone home *before* going to work, just that one time, if it meant avoiding baseless suspicion like this.

Because her pursuers were of the same sex, she hadn't taken it as a serious threat—rather than feeling frightened or creeped out, she actually took some joy in outwitting her opponents. That was careless of her.

"What are you going to do, Setsuna?"

"Huh? What am I going to do?"

Suddenly—or maybe, to her friends, the time was ripe—Setsuna found all of the focus gathered on her.

In the face of all these gazes, full of worry, righteous indignation, and even curiosity, Setsuna couldn't help feeling a bit lost.

Exactly what was everybody expecting of her?

"You have to dispel everyone's suspicions, Setsuna!"
"Wait… But, why?"

Kanako's impatient suggestion gave rise to an indescribable sense of distance within her.

She appreciated the belief in her innocence, but why did that mean she had to go to the trouble of making an appeal to the entire school?

Kanako hadn't taken the measures that were best for Setsuna in the first place.

She could have been indignant, she could have snorted with laughter, she could have told only Setsuna about the email.

But why did she have to show it to all of their classmates?

Surely she must have realized that, in doing so, she was fully taking over the original sender's aim—to spread the rumor.

"Are you really going to let something this stupid crush your chances of being Miss Houjou High two years in a row? Wouldn't that be frustrating for you, Setsuna?!"
"Frustrating…?"

To be totally honest, the idea did not frustrate Setsuna.

In the first place, if Kanako hadn't forced her to enter this year, she probably wouldn't have done it herself. She didn't really want to.

She just couldn't find a suitable excuse for the inevitable hounding—"*Then why did you enter last year?"*—if she refused, and that was all.

With all of this nonsense, she wished she hadn't bothered with it last year, either…

But, at this point, Setsuna didn't have many options for refusing her friend's recommendations.

She certainly couldn't throw away her friend's *"pure good will and favor."*

Ever since "that incident" in middle school, Setsuna had resolved herself to stop *"venting her strong feelings to others."*

"…By the way, Setsuna, what do you do on Wednesdays and Fridays?"
"…"

And now, the flow of conversation was heading in the direction that Setsuna most feared.

The people who had been entirely on her side until mere moments before now rounded on her, the forefront of a suspicious interrogation. This scene was all too familiar.

"Come to think of it, you never come out with any of us on the weekends."
"Well, I guess she doesn't go along with many invitations in general, anyway, but…"

In a sense, the complainant's grievances were true.

Because Wednesday and Friday were Setsuna's *"work shift days."*

But it wasn't anything like paid dating—it was a supermarket, right near the school…

"That's just because… I usually go and study."
"Yeah? You must be going to cram school, then. Where?"
"N-no, I mean… at home."
"Hmmm. That won't serve as proof of your innocence, then."

But she absolutely couldn't speak this slightly uncool, trivial truth of the matter.

Becoming the kind of funny story that made people go, *"What? Seriously?",* an image of her as an ordinary person spreading not only among her class, but through the whole school, the bonds between her and her friends deepening further, the degree of attention on her from surrounding students suddenly dropping… She couldn't picture any of these futures, which would be nothing but convenient for her, panning out.

After all, lately, she hadn't found herself experiencing anything that pleasant…

"Come on, it's fine, just tell us!"
"That's right. If you have nothing to feel guilty about, then there's no need to hide it."
"We're best friends, right?"
"…"

One day in autumn, a month before the school festival and the Miss Houjou contest…

Setsuna, surrounded by friends who were worried about her… experienced a feeling of deep isolation.

"Phew…"

As her sigh echoed around the bathroom, Setsuna submerged her just-washed body in the bathtub, and ran her mind back over the tedious time she had just spent.

The weekend night, the party, the karaoke that she had so long awaited—

She hadn't put in a single request, or even sung backup—just smiled and played the tambourine the whole time, and the regret she felt over wasting her time like that slowly soaked into her heart together with the warmth of the water.

A week had passed since the uproar over that inflammatory message.

To Setsuna, those days had felt like she was standing on a mat of needles… or rather, brush bristles—painful and itchy.

Naturally, the one behind the message still hadn't been found.

And, for this week alone, she hadn't even been followed on Wednesday or Friday.

One could say that there was no longer any need.

After all, the offender's duty had been taken over completely by Setsuna's "best friends."

Ever since that message, every member of Setsuna's friend group, beginning with Kanako, had started aggressively inviting Setsuna to go places, focusing on Wednesdays and Fridays.

And if Setsuna tried to turn down these invitations, they insisted upon prying into her reasons.

"Why?" "Come on, you gotta go with us sometimes." "You don't have anything else going on, right?" "Quit being so reserved." "If you act like this, they're just going to take more and more advantage of it."

Unable to turn down their reasonable but pushy good will, Setsuna was forced to take two days off from work and go along with the other girls.

Yes—as of today, she had skipped work twice in a row.

But this much apparently hadn't been enough to dispel the suspicions of the aforementioned gossip, and the email was still making the rounds.

…On top of that, every time somebody new received it, her friends went out of their way to tell her so.

For all she knew, this "favor" of theirs might well continue even after the school festival and Miss Houjou contest were over.

If this situation did continue, then the day might be near when Setsuna had to quit her job altogether.

Really, that might be the most respectable conclusion for Setsuna.

Her pocket money would decrease, she would have to abandon her efforts to keep her "school idol" status solid, her gold covering would peel off a little at a time,

fewer boys would pine over her, some of her friends might distance themselves, or stop giving her special treatment…

But, before long, she would cease to care about anybody else, and eventually return to the way she had been before "that incident" in middle school…

"I wonder whether the shop is doing okay…"

Still, at this point, Setsuna couldn't see that kind of detour as anything pleasant.

The lack of money and the drop in her superficial value were of little consequence to her.

She just didn't want her world to be restricted to that cramped classroom.

"Kashiwada-san did say that her kids have the flu right now… I hope they're all right."

After missing only two days, the faces of Setsuna's middle-aged, part-time colleagues at work floated in and out of her head.

Yes—what hurt the most to Setsuna now was the loss of that social interaction at her workplace, the loss of that sense of fulfillment.

The fact was, being called "Secchan," and doted upon and teased by the ladies at work, had become a very comfortable daily routine for Setsuna.

They had their own moments of tactlessness, just like her classmates, but thanks to the calmness and experience that came with adulthood, they had never caused Setsuna any pain or bitterness.

More than anything, they treated her like a daughter, rather than an idol. To Setsuna, who found it natural to put family before all else, this was something that felt very nice.

"I have to go next week… No, I *want* to go…"

Once the week started, preparations for the festival would begin in earnest.

This week was also the deadline for entry into the Miss Houjou contest.

Which meant that this coming Monday was a day of decision for Setsuna.

Would she choose the world within the school, or the world without?

Would she choose to be Miss Houjou, or would she choose to be independent, with nobody to interfere with her?

Would she choose her friends from class, or her friends from work?

This was *"a choice between one and the other—one must be cast away."* There was no other option.

She couldn't think of a way to continue keeping both sides alive.

…Not as the fundamentally good person that she was.

"Huh…?"

And, at the start of the week…

After school, in the student council room that had become the temporary office of the school festival action committee…

The words of the committee chair, whom she had only just met, left Setsuna tongue-tied.

"Well, of course, if you object, Ogiso-san, we can pretend this conversation never happened, but… I'd really like you to consider it constructively, if you would."

The petite chairman with silver-rimmed glasses and swept-back hair, speaking extremely politely in spite of his status as an upperclassman, bowed his head deeply before Setsuna.

"You want me to be on the poster for the festival?"
"No, not only that—I'd like you to work in full cooperation with the action committee, as our school festival campaign girl."
"F-full cooperation…?"
"Yes. For example, between now and the day of the festival, making advertising broadcasts during lunch, collecting data from each club and class for publicity videos… Then, on the day of, serving as the award presenter for all of the various ceremonies—ah, with the exception of the Miss Houjou High award, of course."
"…"

Setsuna had actually come here with a completely different purpose in mind.

This morning, after deciding that she would withdraw from the Miss Houjou contest, she finally shook off her depression, slipped out of bed, and came to school.

It might create a breeding ground for future trouble for her class—especially those who called themselves her best friends—but she had had more than enough of attention that she never asked for.

So she marched up to the action committee, with every intention of declaring this herself.

"For the next little while, two days a week should be fine, so could I ask for your cooperation? Monday and Thursday would be ideal for us, but if there are other days you would prefer, that's perfectly all right."
"W-wait just a minute, please. What do you mean…?"
"What do I mean? Exactly what I just said."

However, the third-year committee chair showed her in, saying, *"I had a feeling you would be coming,"* and it was clear that this was going to prove difficult.

"Ogiso-san, you are well-known not only within the school, but in the college as well, and the whole region. I simply must have your help in order to make this year's school festival a success."
"B-but, right now, I…"
"What?"
"…There are some strange rumors about me floating around the school right now. Is that okay?"

She swallowed her real excuse—"*I was actually trying to turn down the Miss Houjou contest to begin with.*"

The flow of the conversation was already hurtling down the complete opposite direction of what she had anticipated.

…In a sense, the committee chairman had led her perfectly by the nose and trapped her.

"Ah, that chain letter, you mean."
"So you know about it, too, chairman."
"Well, is it true?"
"O-of course it—"
"—isn't, right? Then, as far as we're concerned, there's no problem."
"Huh…?"
"That's all you needed to hear, right? Then, if you have no further objections…"

It really seemed like this committee chairman standing before her had seen through absolutely everything.

"B-but, if I do that, then weird rumors will start cropping up around the school festival itself…"
"I don't think they will."
"How can you be so sure…?"

He had all but predicted Setsuna's reaction, and had already gone ahead to establish her escape route.

That was how it felt.

"If you will promise to offer your full cooperation to the action committee, then we in the action committee will back you up fully. And we will make that announcement as soon as tomorrow."
"Y-yes?"
"First, we will post a large-scale notice to our home page that you have taken on the role of School Festival Campaign Girl."
"Um, what exactly does that…?"
"On our blog, we will 'reveal' that this plan has been in the works for over a month."
"…Wait, wait."

"We will 'disclose' everything—that we and Ogiso-san have been meeting 'twice a week' for detailed briefing sessions lasting until nightfall, and that you have been cooperating with us behind-the-scenes in order to build up the festival. We'll say something like, 'We're sorry to have kept this from you all for so long, but…'"
"Then, you mean…"

Having heard all of his, Setsuna now understood perfectly what the action committee was trying to do.

In other words, this was about thwarting that email.

Using a lie with evidence, to shut down a fact without evidence.

"…Um, Ogiso-san, this is a serious problem for us, as well."

The committee chairman gave a small, slightly wry grin.

Given a kind look like this after having such a bomb dropped, Setsuna found herself less and less able to read the face of the person standing in front of her.

"If you were to withdraw your entry into the Miss Houjou High contest, to be perfectly frank, the damage to this year's festival, which has been prepared with that contest as a pillar of the whole event, would be unfathomable. In other words, our interests in this matter correspond with one another perfectly."
"But telling such a public lie…"
"If it turned out that *you* were doing anything like what that email indicated, we ourselves would never work with you. We are endorsing you because we have faith that you aren't lying."
"But I'm not the one about to lie, here… No, never mind."

It seemed that there would be no merit in pushing this any further—in fact, it would be completely meaningless, and serve only to tire her out—so Setsuna made the decision to drop her attack on his word choice.

She didn't get the sense that she would be able to beat this upperclassman in an argument.

"Why do you trust me this much, in the first place?"
"Ah, well… Maybe it's confidence, maybe it's fear…"
"Huh?"

When she posed this question, the committee chair's wry smile changed for the barest moment into something truly unpleasant.

"If the ones above believe you, then the ones below will have to believe you, too…"
"So, chairman, since you stand *above,* I'm asking why *you* believe me."
"…Who ever said that the committee chair is the highest?"
"Oh?"
"Ah, no… nothing."

And this line that followed, connected with the refined logic that he had used up to this point, seemed more like a grumble.

"W-well, anyway… How about it? Will you consider it?"
"Chairman…"

It wasn't even a matter for thought.

All of Setsuna's reasons for hesitating to accept the conditions had been eliminated.

The schedule that deliberately avoided Wednesdays and Fridays.

This collaboration that would make it seem as though she were with the action committee every day.

Indeed, the cover-up that stretched back in time, even to *before* these suspicions broke out.

The accusations would be fully, publically refuted, and the Houjou High School Festival would be completely unified in support of Setsuna.

It was perfect.

Almost too perfect, in fact, and she couldn't entirely sweep away some misgivings, as though she might be falling into a nasty double-layered scheme…

But, starting the next day, Setsuna Ogiso became the face of this year's Houjou High School Festival.

Setsuna's smiling face was plastered absolutely everywhere in the school.

Every day at lunch, Setsuna's voice rang through the school like a bell.

Setsuna's video reports adorned the top of the school festival homepage every week.

The content of that email, the sender, the atmosphere of investigation, had all been blown away…

When the festival started, the Miss Houjou High contest received its highest number of votes ever—a smashing success.

…But there was one thing that nobody had realized about the outcome, since before the voting even started.

"Secchaaaan! When you're done with that, come to the register, please!"
"All righty!"

As she worked on applying the discount stickers as usual, Setsuna could tell from the queue forming at the register that they had reached the busiest part of the evening.

Soon it would be hot pot season, and napa cabbages, daikon, and all sorts of other vegetables meant to warm one up from the heart peeked out of the storefront and customers' baskets.

One month after the school festival ended…

As it turned out, Setsuna had kept on with her job at the grocery store ever since.

There were no longer any suspicious underclassmen following her, and it seemed that her perfect disguise, bespectacled and braided, would hold up for a little while yet.

"All done!"

After she finished placing the stickers, Setsuna looked briskly up at the winter sky.

The sun was setting earlier, and in the long-since-darkened night sky, a full moon was beginning to rise with abandon.

Even in this cold, there were many people coming and going through this stationfront.

Married couples stopping by to pick up ingredients for dinner, men on the way home from work slightly early, elderly people ambling around with no clear objective or regard for the hour.

And just a few Houjou High School students.

"I'm taking the register!"

Nonchalantly escaping the stares fixed on her from the male students outside the store, Setsuna returned to her task inside, brimming with vigor.

Oden, or hot pot…?

She pictured the menu for that night's dinner in her head.

"…I'm glad I was able to keep working here."
"What are you doing, standing around here?"
"What do you mean, what am I doing? You were taking forever to get back from the music store."
"Hey, look, a really nice second-hand one just came in, and I couldn't help myself. Lost track of time."
"Takeya, you already have three guitars. Don't tell me you're gonna buy another one?"
"What are you talking about? This is for *you,* Haruki. Real easy-to-use model, perfect for a beginner. Think about it, will ya?"
"You seriously think I'll be able to play something like that?"
"You'll be popular, dude. The girls will come *running.* You'll be the hero of the school festival, I'm telling you."
"Why would I play it at the school festival?!"

"Well, I guess that would be a pretty busy time for you… They do call you the 'secret action committee chairman,' and all."
"Oh, hell no. No way am I gonna be the chairman next year."

The Love that Would Not Reach, has Reached

"The action committee chairman's… assistant?"
"Ogiso…?
"Are you, perhaps… the guitarist?"
"White Album"…

A melody that connected Music Room #1 and Music Room #2, that evening on the rooftop, with a month remaining before the school festival—one might call it a coincidence, one might call it an inevitability, one might call it a miracle.

The first song for just the three of them: "He played guitar, she filled it in with piano, and she sang."

And…

"…What is this?"
"Ah, um, well…"
"A new song. The third one. Our last number."
"Oh…"

Nearly a month later, on a Friday…

One person became two, two became three, and at last, they had reached the day before the school festival concert…

"Kitahara wrote the lyrics, I set them to music, and you're going to sing, Ogiso. A song for just the three of us."

One more song, just for the three of them, was completed here.

Chapter 1 Haruki

"That's not really a problem. I told you, there's a second guitar."
"No, I told you, I'm not doing it."

Half a year before the school festival, in early May…

Four male students were gathered in Music Room #1 after school, and a heated argument was unfolding.

"It's *fine*, Haruki. Even if we start now, we'll have more than enough time."
"Quit trying to pacify me, Takeya. I know best what my own abilities are."
"It's true that your skills right now are pretty hopeless. There's not much likelihood of a drastic improvement in half a year. But the school festival is just a festival, right?"
"I'm not playing. Absolutely not, no way."

No, to be more precise—just now, out of all of them, only two of them were arguing… Takeya Iizuka, and Haruki Kitahara.

The other three around watched their quarrel from a distance, playing the instruments they held, fiddling with their phones, relaxing with a fairly unbothered attitude.

This was because the current discussion was more or less inconsequential, having been born out of a much more serious discussion concerning choosing and inviting a vocalist.

"Concerning the promotion of Haruki Kitahara, substitute guitarist, to an official member"

"Then, air guitar, maybe…"
"Takeya, I hope you aren't telling me to be a street performer."

This impromptu band, formed merely one month earlier, the "Light Music Club," was a gathering of showy, superficial guys who planned on flaunting their own coolness in the school festival six months later, aiming for the arrival of the last-minute popularity that came at the end of one's school life—with these extremely trivial, flimsy, light motives it was formed.

However, the members, who originally had been steeped in the opportunistic ideology of "If we play instruments then we'll be popular with girls," having now sacrificed themselves to this dogma, had somehow or another mostly become more or less an experienced band lineup.

When it was asked whether the one exception to this "mostly," the guitar abilities of Haruki, who joined after being invited by his friend, would come to something good after half a year, everybody couldn't help feeling doubtful.

"But it's *the* school festival, right? Even *you* will probably want a girl or two by then, right, Haruki?"
"What do you mean, 'two'? I'm not *you*, Takeya. No, forget about that. The point is, I'm not playing."
"Haruki…"

Even Haruki, who grasped the mood of his surroundings more clearly than anyone, would probably thoroughly reject this proposal from Takeya, even though there was pure friendship in his attempts to lure him in.

"But, there is just one thing I want to do. Can I tell you that?"
"What?"

Right at that moment, as an alternative suggestion, he put forth this single hope, his heart's desire.

Because Haruki knew.

In order to convey what he really wanted to do, first he had to give the other person a feeling of obligation, forming up an atmosphere for drawing out concessions and compromises—he knew that this was an effective method.

"Ohhh, that might be good, huh?"
"It would. A way of showing some of our real color…"
"It would definitely get all the people at the school festival worked up and excited…"

And so, Haruki's underhanded… no, clever strategy seemed to have borne fruit…

The other members, who until now had been half-heartedly *"pretending to"* support Takeya, when presented with this humble alternative suggestion, threw their support behind it assertively, relief showing plainly on their faces.

Because, to them, Haruki was not even remotely a hindrance to the group.

Their abilities as band members were what they were, but to a club that had been just formed this year with no backing, the rumored leverage of the "secret school festival action committee chairman," and his well-established political strength, were unquestionably crucial.

"So, any objections?"
"What about you, Haruki? You good with things being like this?"
"It's not about 'things being like this,' Takeya."

Takeya, the only one out of the group with a slight but truly vexed expression, was faced by Haruki, who answered with his own slightly but truly satisfied expression.

"This is the culmination of my three years here."
"Huh…"

And, that night…

Taking a break from studying in his room, Haruki opened up a new notebook, wrote "Title:" on the first line, and having finished those five letters he flung his pencil away and looked toward the sky.

"Writing lyrics… What the hell have I talked myself into…?"

"Writing lyrics for an original number, to be played at the school festival"

When it came to the school festival concert, what Haruki had wanted was this behind-the-scenes position—in a sense, a very important one.

At the time, thinking from the perspective of his grades in Modern Japanese class, he had judged that this part would suit him best, and believed it to be a solid choice…

But the fact that he had used his academic performance as a basis for evaluation in the first place may in and of itself have been proof that he wasn't cut out to be in a band.

"If I at least had a *question* to answer…"

Yes, if this were a problem on a test…

If something like *"State the emotions of the main character at this time"* were written on the blank page, Haruki could easily cram the paper full of detailed, scathing critiques of every single problem with the character's attitude and behavior, even going beyond what the question asked…

But, now that he was thinking about it, even that required at least an example sentence to work with.

And so, having finally realized his own extreme ineptitude in devising such an "example sentence," Haruki still spent an hour, copy-pasting bits of lyrics from recent, major songs he knew and stringing them together… only to shriek in frustration and rip them up in the space of a second.

Then, reflecting that *"plagiarism was a bad thing,"* he roused himself up to write again, seriously this time, using his own words… and wrote nothing for a further hour.

The fact was, none of the words that came to his mind from his own experiences created images that could be conveyed by melody of a guitar, or the rhythm of the drums.

Haruki's daily life to this point was completely incompatible with rock music.

He wasn't dissatisfied with society.

He couldn't put his gloomy thoughts about his family into words.

Love, then… But there was no such thing in his ashen school life.

"…I'll do it tomorrow."

In the end, after wasting three hours, Haruki glanced at the clock—it was almost two in the morning—then put the lyrics notebook sitting before him into a drawer, and took down a reference book from his bookshelf.

And the time passed, and August came.

One evening, toward the middle of the summer holidays…

Haruki rushed at full speed up the stairs of his apartment building, flew into his room, and began rooting around in his desk drawer, without even stopping to get changed or dry off his waterfalls of sweat.

"…Found it!"

And finally, after throwing all of the tidily organized contents into disarray, he found the single notebook resting at the very back of the drawer and held it above his head with a roar of victory.

…This was his moment of reunion with the lyrics notebook, after three months.

In the beginning, he felt embarrassed, trying to assemble words out of emotions.

On top of that, his failure to make any significant improvement with the guitar had caused him to start losing passion for the band.

Meanwhile, even though he was just supposed to be assisting, his duties as festival committee chair were growing more and more hectic, leaving him little time to think.

And so, with one thing and another, for the past three months, the lyric composition for the original festival number had not progressed whatsoever.

But, today, something had happened that renewed his motivation.

He had managed to play a song all the way through.

His favorite song had become the one song he could play.

That excitement, that uplift, reawakened Haruki's desire to commit his emotions to words.

He didn't care if it wasn't in the current popular style. He didn't care if it was outdated.

He didn't care if it wasn't "rock." All he knew was western-style pop, anyway, so there was no helping that.
And love… Even if he had never felt it, he could picture it now.

"…to be lonely…"

What Haruki tried to picture was his ideal girl, who existed only in his imagination.

For example, that worn-out sense of distance between those who sit next to each other in class.

An aloof girl who had nothing to do with anyone, the kind of setting that would draw the interest of the listeners.

But it made for a scene that was convenient for both creator and listener—directing kind words at oneself, and nobody else.

"…couldn't help but wonder…"

…and so a particular character began spilling, from these odds and ends that he spun together, so much that he managed to fool even himself.

The girl he was picturing was, without a doubt, a real girl—the one next to him.

The one in the next desk over, who never had anything to do with anyone.

…But, today, she had become his guitar teacher, this classmate with long black hair.

"…Wait."

And, somehow, he had written a song…

Naturally, as he looked at these overly imaginative lyrics, Haruki gave a strained smile through a cold sweat, but he still nodded in approval, took out a red pen, and began making revisions.

Correcting a piece of work according to set rules was Haruki's area of expertise.

First, he made the content as ambiguous as possible.

He made the gender of the person singing, and that of the object of their feelings, unclear.

He didn't use first person. He restricted it to second person—"You."

Because the hero of this song was not Haruki Kitahara.

Because the *"you"* was not Kazusa Touma, the one who sat next to Haruki and taught him how to play the guitar.

This was that most common of stories—*"An ordinary person, longing for someone they could never reach."*

"…Well, I figure that should do it."

Haruki looked at the notebook, the text so covered in red that no one apart from him would be able to make head or tail of it, and nodded, slightly embarrassed, but quite satisfied.

For just a moment, he pictured the annoyed face of the girl he had used as his model, and he almost lost his nerve, but it faded quickly.

"All right. Let's see about the second one."

Haruki vigorously turned the page of the notebook, unaware that the sun had long since set.

Chapter 2 Kazusa

"…Oh, right, I almost forgot. Read this."

"What kind of joke are you pulling this time?"

"If you can… I want you to make this guy's real wish come true."

"What…"

With this exchange, Takeya Iizuka, temporary head of the light music club, gave her a notebook, wearing an uncharacteristically serious expression.

"…Pff…"

…was the first word she said, or rather the first sound she made, after opening it.

"You're telling me he came up with this? I don't even… Aha, ahaha…"

And the next sound she made was this—a laugh that was refreshing, in a sense, though it could have been taken for sneering or snickering.

Kazusa Touma—
Houjou High School, third year, class E.

She was a tall girl, with long, straight black hair that was a point of pride—or rather, it was clear that she had chosen to grow it out herself.

…Incidentally, while she had an aloof personality and did not socialize with anyone, she was a kind girl at the core, with a meddlesome classmate who couldn't play guitar sitting next to her.

Mid-November…

A late autumn night, a week before the school festival concert.

In the music studio in the basement of her home, Kazusa set the open notebook on the music stand of her piano, and fully enjoyed its contents in several senses.

"So, even he has the kind of sensitivity that leads him to get lost in these pitiful delusions."

Her feelings, which had been a little hazy after a small argument with a friend shortly before, seemed to be clearing up now.

It was ridiculous that a relationship between two girls should become strained over the kind of blundering guy who wrote embarrassing poetry like this.

To Kazusa, Haruki Kitahara, the one responsible for writing these lyrics, was an irritating classmate who was always flitting around in her line of sight, a thorn in her side, an idiot who couldn't be left to his own devices, and something like a favored pupil.

To their classmates and teachers, he seemed incomparably trustworthy, reliable, and easy to use to one's own convenience, like a god who would grant prayers without being given an offering.

And yet, for Kazusa, he seemed only like a hopeless pest, depressing, weirdly dependent, and bringing burden after burden.

And so, this notebook of dark secrets, full of the embarrassing words that he penned, provided a once-in-a-lifetime chance to clear her pent-up frustrations.

As she pondered how best to use this new fact about that overly serious chairman, his secret hidden side as a deluded poet, Kazusa began tickling the piano keys lightly, not bothering to hide the smile on her face.

"Are you pretending to be lonely?"

The melody with her right hand, the accompaniment with her left.

She played a tune she had never used anywhere else, off the cuff, fitting it to these lyrics.

After all, this notebook contained only the lyrics and the name of the lyricist.

No score, no music writing credit—nothing.

Which meant that, as it was, there was no way this could be used in the show.

"Couldn't help but wonder why…"

She scribbled down notations in pencil on the music paper that she had set up next to the notebook.

Her left hand continued roaming over the keys, seeking out sounds to adorn the melody.

Moments ago, she had thoroughly laughed off these lyrics, but now, she faced them seriously.

Really, she hadn't had any complaint with the execution of the lyrics in the first place.

Even though they were a little clumsy, and a little too earnest.

That was exactly what made the honest feelings in them come across so directly.

To be fully honest, she found herself just a bit moved.

…At the same time, when she pictured the face of the person who had written it, all she could do was laugh.

"How can I make you see my heart…"

"…Ah."

But, the moment she reached the B section of the song, Kazusa unconsciously stopped playing.

Her gaze was fixed on the room's digital clock.

"What am I even doing…?"

It was the day a week before the school festival, not yet past midnight.

In one week, she would get that lousy guitarist into shape, make things work with the second song, *"Sound of Destiny,"* fine-tune the programming…

And, finally, lead the school festival concert to success.

Out of the three who would appear in the concert, she was the only one with any stage experience, and she would see all of it through.

For Kazusa, who lately had only touched the piano in the spirit of playing around, even for her main profession, this was plainly a burden that could be considered "overwork."

Thinking rationally, this was no time to be taking the long way around.

First of all, making this still-at-risk show succeed without a hitch was definitely the top priority.

But…

"At this point, will you be able to make it in time? Is this too much, even for you, Touma?"

"…I've got plenty of time."

Finally, Kazusa returned her fingers to the piano.

She put on as much affectation as she could, following along with the cheap provocation that existed only in her own imagination.

"I'm the only one who can save him…"

Long ago, up until middle school, Kazusa believed…

that when it came to music, as long as she put forth a serious effort, there was nothing she couldn't do.

For a while, the talent was abandoned, forsaken by its real mother.

Still, if it was just making one song…

Just enough to succeed at the school festival show…

At a level that would get a reaction out of that idiot… She had plenty of time.

"How can I make you see my heart, reflected in the mirror?"

Once more, the melody of the piano rang through the room.

Empathizing with these honest lyrics, with all her might…

and driving all thoughts of the one who wrote them from her mind, Kazusa composed.

A song about feelings for someone who seemed solitary.

A song about trying to reach out to a closed-off, blunt, bitter, lonely person.

It was a fortunate misconception.

And a fatal misunderstanding.

Until the very, very end, Kazusa didn't realize.

The true identity of the someone who seemed solitary.

The name of the lonely someone who never opened her heart.

Not even the plain, honest feelings directed at that someone.

But at this point, for Kazusa, there was no helping that.

Because, at that moment, Kazusa Touma was a completely different person from the character who appeared in these lyrics.

She wasn't solitary.

She wasn't lonely.

She was friendly.

She was open.

…Indeed, her heart was open.

'Chapter 3 Setsuna

"…What is this?"
"Ah, um, well…"
"A new song. The third one. Our last number."
"Oh…"
"Kitahara wrote the lyrics, I set them to music, and you're going to sing, Ogiso. A song for just the three of us."

With this exchange, Kazusa Touma, true head of the light music club, gave her a sheaf of sheet music, wearing an uncharacteristically encouraging smile.

"A song… for the three of us?"

…was the first thing she said after reading it.

Setsuna Ogiso—
Houjou High School, third year, class A.

She was a girl with the perfect balance of traits that boys idealized, a lovely appearance and a gentle manner that were a point of pride—or possibly an unwelcome blessing.

…Incidentally, even though everyone recognized her demeanor as "the true essence of a school idol," she was a girl with a slightly impish nature, who was occupied single-mindedly with the most stubborn honor student in the whole school.

Late November…

The first day of the school festival had finally arrived.

It was three o'clock in the afternoon on Friday, with the main event—the concert—set to take place the next day.

Setsuna, working as a hostess to round up customers for her class's Taisho-style tearoom, had spotted Haruki and abruptly abducted him, then spirited him down into the Touma house's basement studio while still in her hostess outfit, where they had spent a day full of many ups and downs.

And the clincher, the biggest surprise that brought all this madness, had just been announced by the owner of this studio.

"The love that… would not reach…"

Until yesterday, Setsuna and the other members of the Light Music Club had been visited by crisis after crisis.

The guitar solo meant to serve as the centerpiece of the second song, *"Sound of Destiny,"* was still incomplete.

Kazusa, who was supposed to be the primary emotional support for the members, suddenly got sick and had to withdraw.

With Kazusa and Haruki both out of the picture, Setsuna faced her rehearsal alone, only to find that her voice wouldn't come, either—it was a fiasco.

Mere hours before, considering everybody's problems, it had seemed uncertain whether they would even be able to stand onstage at all, let alone pull off a successful show.

But now, the situation had changed…

"Well, I, um… Since I've been in this club from the start, I figured I should at least write *one* song, or something."

Haruki was playing the part of the cool guy, Kazusa had made a full recovery, and Setsuna had managed to reunite with her friends.

This sort of massive turnaround from the brink of disaster should have been cause for great excitement.

In fact, until Haruki had snatched it away shortly before, that was definitely the case.

"Are you pretending to be lonely?"
"Couldn't help but wonder why."

"We had Takeya to play guitar, so I never thought that I would actually be onstage."

Haruki's sheepish voice seemed to come from a great distance away.

In fact, he was right next to her, practically speaking right into her ear, but barely any of what he said was making its way into her head.

Right now, Setsuna had been left behind by the high spirits of the other two.

"Next thing I knew, somehow…"
"I wanted you more than anybody else."

"But, well, whether this is the culmination of three years, or just a bit of stupidity…"

She had never understood the meanings of musical notation, but today, her eyes weren't even seeing it at all.

She was looking below that.

At the lyrics that read, "Kitahara wrote this," written one-by-one above the notes like phonetic readings.

"How can I make you see my heart, reflected in the mirror?"

The scene began to form itself vividly in Setsuna's brain, down to every detail.

How could it not?

After all, these words, this song…

An honor student's clumsy love awakening for the bad girl by the window.

These feelings put into writing, feelings that wouldn't be conveyed, were too embarrassing to be conveyed, and yet hoped to be conveyed—they were all-too-transparent words of confession.

Feelings so strong that they came across even to Setsuna, who had known both the honor student boy and the delinquent girl for only a month.

"This love may never reach you, but the day may come when it appears…"

And so, Setsuna understood that which had not even entered the brain of the lyricist.

That before the honor student boy's gaze, there was another girl, from a different class—one he had met only a month before—who was not appearing to him.

"U-um, this part, here!"
"What? Is there something weird? It would help me out a lot if you could give me

some harsh critiques."
"No, it's not that… Here."

After looking at the boy's blank, puzzled expression, she fixed her eyes hard on the girl in front of the piano.

And that girl… Kazusa, shrugged her shoulders in resignation, and smiled at Setsuna with a sigh.

In the depths of her eyes shone a soft, gentle light, full of affection, which she never showed anyone.

It wasn't composure, or gratitude, and certainly not ill will.

And so, Setsuna understood yet another thing.

That these words, this song, were still in progress.

That the hero's feelings were still in the air, still hadn't reached the heroine.

"Ready to go, Ogiso?"
"Y-yes…"

At Kazusa's call, it finally struck home to Setsuna that the time had come.

The moment when all their individual practice was over, and they would come together as a trio…

The moment when she had to sing Haruki's song about his feelings for Kazusa.

"Can you come too, Kitahara?"
"Yeah…"

Even at this moment, Setsuna was not confident.

She couldn't possibly feel confident in her ability to sing these lyrics, this song, all the way through, with a genuine smile on her face, like it was just another solo karaoke performance.

But this was Haruki's dream.

His greatest dream of the past three years, which Kazusa had worked herself half to death trying to grant.

It wasn't entirely possible to tell exactly how strong Kazusa's own feelings were…

But she hadn't hidden her actions in support of Haruki from Setsuna.

That alone made her an insurmountably formidable enemy.

"Let's go, then… you two."
"Yeah."
"…Right."

In which case, all Setsuna could do was support Haruki, like Kazusa had.

Her strongest rival had worked this hard, so she couldn't possibly back down.

The guitar rang out, the piano played on…

In that moment, the scene of that day rose up in Setsuna's eyes and ears.

The rooftop at dusk, her own slight boredom.

The melody of *"White Album,"* which beckoned her into something more enjoyable.

"Yes, of course… This is the continuation of that moment…"
"Which means that, now, I can pay it back."
"To the guitar and piano that guided me then…"
"I will add as much of my voice as I can."

After the Festival ~Setsuna's Thirty Minutes~

"Seriously, you are so boring…"
"What's wrong with you, it's like you're asking for it…"

?!

At that moment…

Kazusa leaned forward a bit.

Her long black hair spilled over her shoulder, covering Haruki's face.

That instant, when their two faces overlapped one another completely…

Setsuna, watching through the gap in the door a few meters away, burned the image into her eyes.

"…Ah… Ahh…"

Kazusa's voice, which could have been taken as a sigh of lament or a cry of pain, reached Setsuna's ears clearly.

"S-Sorry… Sorry, Kitahara… I kissed you."

At the same time, her feelings, which had been as flushed as her body, began to run wild.

"It's… your fault, got it?"

Because she had witnessed the feelings of her best friend… No, her closest friend, who had taken a step toward being her best friend…

"…No, it's not. I'm sorry. I'm the worst."

Because she had had a brush with Kazusa's unbelievably girlish emotions.

After the Festival ~Setsuna's Thirty Minutes~ I

"Haruki-kun?"

A few minutes later…

In Music Room #2, which alone seemed to have been completely forgotten in the excitement of the school festival…

"Haruki-kun…"

Setsuna stood waiting in front of Haruki, in the same posture Kazusa had taken a short while earlier.

The last rays of the setting sun shone weakly in through the window.

But, in all likelihood, that glow would vanish within the next ten minutes, its existence buried in darkness.

"Hnn…"

Haruki didn't notice Setsuna's stare in the least.

But that was only natural. After all, since yesterday—or for the past several days, more likely—he had been exerting himself with no sleep, polishing his guitar playing, helping Kazusa recover from her sickness, and encouraging Setsuna.

However, he wasn't the only one who didn't notice Setsuna there.

The one who, just now, had flown from the classroom… The one who had nestled up to Setsuna this morning, sleeping…

Touma-san…

She hadn't noticed Setsuna because she was deeply agitated.

Because she was focused solely and heavily on a single feeling.

Because, unexpectedly, she "wasn't that strong," as she had said.

…Perhaps because she just didn't care about Setsuna at that moment.

That's not right… Touma-san.

The remark she had murmured a moment before came out again, with stronger feeling this time.

"Nn…"

She resented Haruki, sleeping there next to her without a care in the world.

But she realized that that was probably exactly what Kazusa had been feeling a few minutes earlier, and felt a rush of sympathy, together with an agitation that was even more complicated and intense.

At this moment, Setsuna knew how Kazusa was feeling.

Because they had slept next to each other this morning.

Because, having tired of arguing, they snuggled up with each other and slept, like best friends.

Their hearts had connected with one another then.

Even if it had been concerning a single boy, they had confirmed their friendship with one another, and numerous other feelings, as a result.

Why… Why now?

But, half a day had passed…

Within that half a day, the balance Setsuna had built up between the three of them had abruptly collapsed.

It wasn't Kazusa's fault. It wasn't Haruki's fault.

And it certainly wasn't Setsuna's fault… But it had been her mistake.

There was no lie in the way Kazusa felt then.

She clearly meant to treasure her friendship with Setsuna.

She wanted to accept Setsuna as her best friend.

But, she hadn't been able to switch the order of priority between "friendship" and "love."

This is because of me.

Even though there was no liability in it, Setsuna accepted the blunder as her fault.

She was in the wrong for forcing such an unreasonable demand.

It had been unreasonable for her to ask for a relationship as "best friends who share feelings for the same person."

If that love was never to reach anyone, Setsuna's wish probably could have been granted.

If it was never to reach anyone, then they could have talked to each other about their feelings for him, ridiculed each other for feeling so strongly, envied, shared, laughed, raged, cried, and steadily deepened their friendship as two girls, deepened their yearning for the boy…

They could have enjoyed what Setsuna called their "middle-school love" as much as they liked.

But, ironically, the one they loved was within arm's reach of both of them at this point.

Because he faced girls, faced everyone, straight-on.

Because he spoke to these two in particular in an *especially* honest, unaffected manner.

No, maybe she was just making excuses. In reality, there may have been a tiny difference in the way he treated the two of them, but Setsuna herself certainly had a chance…

I've made up my mind.

But Setsuna cut her reasoning off before it could progress any further.

She didn't want to reach a conclusion she didn't want to know.

She would rather…

I can give up on Haruki-kun.

I'm going to support Kazusa.

After the Festival ~Setsuna's Thirty Minutes~ II

"…Huh?"

The room was perfectly shrouded in darkness. Through the still-open window, she could hear a faint noise from the schoolyard.

The general attendees had set off for home, and all that remained were likely students who were busily making preparations for the final day of the high school festival.

But Setsuna didn't turn her attention to that outside state of affairs, instead continuing to gaze at the peaceful sleeping face before her.

This is fine.

Kazusa and Haruki-kun can keep getting closer.

They can become boyfriend and girlfriend, step by step.

…Just focusing on the whereabouts of her own feelings.

It'll be fine, if it's these two.

Haruki-kun promised me.

He said he would never shut me out.

Desperately searching for common ground between the three of them…

For her own ground.

Maybe Touma-san doesn't like me that much.

Maybe she's just trying to be friends with me because of Haruki-kun.

But that's fine, too.

I know she'll do everything he tells her.

She might complain, but she'll put in the effort for him. She'll endure.

…She'll keep getting along with me, like she has been.

Because she really, truly loves him.

She loves him so much that just having him next to her kept her from being lonely.

After spending a little while longer, during which nothing moved but the clock, Setsuna finally dropped the hand she had been holding up, letting it fall to her knee.

…Chasing the reason for her hand having been there out of her head.

I'm okay with us staying a trio.

No, that's actually exactly what I want.

So… it's okay if Touma-san dates Haruki-kun.

He's been looking at her this whole time, anyway.

She has her own priorities.

No matter how I might try to wedge myself in, that's not a bond I can win against.

So… So…

"Oh, come on…"

She pressed her hand against her knee, slowly rose…

But her body didn't want to stand up, and she scolded herself with some bewilderment.

I should go home. Just leave Haruki-kun here like this.

And, tomorrow, I'll greet them both with a cheerful "Good morning!"

Haruki-kun will probably give an even friendlier "Good morning" than before.

Because he's etched in the memories of our performance today.

And Kazusa will respond with an even more awkward "Y-Yeah…" than before, no doubt.

…Because, today, she learned the feeling of his lips.

"What's wrong with me…?"

And I'll look at how worried she's acting, and laugh.

Chuckle, and make her anxiety even worse.

Before long, she'll feel certain of the weirdness in the way I'm acting.

No, maybe I should just come right out with it.

"I saw you last night, you know."

"This is no good…"

Then, she'll turn beet-red, and look down.

Maybe, just maybe, she'll be on the verge of tears.

…Yes, that could be a very fun thing to aim for in the future.

The cool, dignified Kazusa Touma, looking so embarrassed that she wants to disappear…

Yes, that would be absolutely adorable.

"Why…?"

To Touma-san, it might be completely unthinkable that she would be subjected to that.

But, I mean, she brought it on herself.

It's only natural that I would hassle her like that.

Because she has no guiding principles.

She lied to me this morning.

A big lie—saying she didn't have anyone she liked.

"You didn't tell me… You refused to tell me, Touma-san…!"

She didn't stop my falling for him.

She didn't accept my declaration of war…

At that moment, Setsuna finally acknowledged it.

Acknowledged that, no matter how hard she tried, she wasn't going to be able to stand up.

Acknowledged that her voice was shaking, because she was clenching her teeth.

Acknowledged that the droplets falling to the floor in front of her were blurring her vision…

I could never beat you if you got serious.

But why did you have to get serious now, today of all days…?

On such a fun, happy day?

This is the kind of moment that you want to freeze for a lifetime. Why would you move ahead…?

"…Ah… N-No…"

Setsuna's voice, tearful from sorrow, frustration, and anger, colored the silence of the music room.

She could imagine well enough what would happen if Haruki woke up right now—she *knew,* better than anyone—but she couldn't stop this eruption of emotion, small though it was.

It's not fair, Touma-san.

Why couldn't you have confessed to him sooner?

You should have done it back when I could still withdraw.

I would have pouted, complained, maybe even cried a little.

I would have troubled you and Haruki-kun, caused you all kinds of worry.

In the end, I would have recovered on my own, embraced you both, shocking you…

And I could have snuffed out the tiny light of love that I was feeling.

"No, no… Why… Why…!"

The reactions of her body wouldn't follow the voice in her heart.

In fact, the more her body resisted, the more her heart came to follow her body instead.

I'm crying…

I'm crying because my dear friend followed through on her feelings.

I'm crying right in front of my other dear friend.

I'm crying, unable to feel happy for my two friends.

As a result…

I'm terrible, aren't I?

I'm the worst.

All she could do was loathe herself, heart and body both.

After the Festival ~Setsuna's Thirty Minutes~ III

"?! Huh…?"

Maybe it was someone's laughter echoing from another classroom somewhere, maybe it was the sound of the engine of the mini-truck that had entered the campus…

"Touma…?"

Haruki, who had been dead to the world this whole time, nodded his head, and slowly opened his eyes.

After that, he looked blearily around the whole of the classroom, probably because what he was seeing now was a bit different from his recollection just before he fell asleep.

For example, the light in Music Room #2 had been redder, the room filled with a gentle melody…

"Guess she left…"

And *she* had been with him…

"Good morning."
"?!"

What emotion was it that led her to speak up, disrupting his distant, dreamy gaze, as he pondered?

"Good morning, Haruki-kun. And nice work today."
"Setsuna…?"

Even Setsuna herself didn't really know.

All she knew was that she wasn't reflected in his eyes right now.

All she knew was that her heart, or maybe her body, had responded automatically, not wanting to acknowledge that fact.

"Oh, uhh… What about class?"
"Class is over. It's almost six o'clock."

…In other words, she actually knew full well.

"…Already? Wow, I slept a while."
"Yeah. I got here half an hour ago."

Yes, thirty minutes had passed since Setsuna arrived here.

"Why didn't you wake me up…?"
"I didn't want to."

In that time, she had managed to keep herself from rubbing her reddened eyes, pressing them instead with her handkerchief, to get them back to normal.

…She'd had no reason to wake him up.

"You don't have to be that considerate. I know you're tired, too…"
"But I wouldn't be able to enjoy watching you sleep that way! It would have been a waste."
"What…?!"
"…"

The beaming smile she was giving Haruki right now was nothing more than a performance, a desperate attempt to keep him from sensing the face she had been making just before.

"…You're kidding, right?"
"…"
"Tell me you're kidding."
"Heehee!"
"Hey! Tell me you're just messing with me!"
"Aha… Nope, nope!"

But Setsuna's gamble was more than sufficient to fool the groggy Haruki.

And so, behind her impish grin and devilish words, she fell into a storm of violent self-loathing.

"Ahhhhh… Man, my body hurts all over."
"You worked really hard today. This whole week, I mean."

For lying to Haruki.

For the fact that she might end up lying to Kazusa, too.

…For acting frankly according to her own desires.

"Well, you also… Huh?"

The coat lying across Haruki's shoulders right now was an emblem of that.

"Did… you put this here?"
"Mom brought it. She said it was a change of clothes, since I didn't go home yesterday."
"…Yeah, I'm really sorry about that."

Haruki must have thought that she put it on him half an hour before.

But that wasn't true. She had actually only just done it.

"Here, you can have it back. Sorry, this is what the guy is supposed to do…"

Because, after Setsuna got here, she couldn't pay Haruki that much mind for a little while.

She was crying, going to pieces, burning, and she completely forgot to sense the chill in the room.

"No, Haruki-kun, you've already done what the boy is supposed to do."

The coat was just one part of her strategy.

To make him feel indebted to her.

To *fool* him into thinking she was a nice girl.

After all, what she was about to do might well amount to an incredible breach of trust, not "nice" in the least.

…Just for a split second, that dark thought flickered through her head.

"You helped me be brave. Brave enough to stand up on that stage, facing all those people, and still enjoy myself singing."
"I didn't… do all that."

After she slowly turned her back, she felt Haruki's hands on her shoulders, just as expected, slipping the coat onto her.

Even as she rejoiced in things going according to plan, she felt all the more hatred of her own darkness.

"That was *sooo* much fun!"
"It really was."

But, no matter how she might curse herself for being underhanded, curse herself for being cowardly, she couldn't stop playing this role, a girl still in a state of elation in the afterglow of the performance.

"I was so nervous about singing in front of people, but now that I've crossed that line once, I don't think I'll be able to stop."

Because if she cried right now, it would ruin everything.

"Yeah, I still remember how you looked, singing in the spotlight."

But, even if she gave up now… everything would have to break sooner or later.

She pictured a dazzling light before her eyes, but couldn't see any light beyond it.

"…Come to think of it, I didn't do any choreography or anything."
"That's trivial. No one cared."
"Ah… I can still hear them cheering. I don't think I'll ever forget how it sounded. If I shut my eyes, it's like I'm still dreaming."

She wanted to remember the voices of praise, but all that came to her were Kazusa's voice, full of grief and wonder, and her own voice… full of deep resentment.

"Think you want to do it again, then? I'm nothing big, but with you and Touma, we could probably play an even bigger event…"
"Hey, Haruki-kun…"
"Hm?"
"You'll stay with me forever, right?"

So, in order to escape from the light and sound that cornered her, Setsuna strayed down the path that she knew was worst.

"…If you want me to."
"You're going to Houjou University? Humanities, right? Which department are you thinking about?"
"Huh? Oh, well, I'm planning on Politics and Economics right now…"
"Hmph… Why not English Lit?"
"No, I'm bad at English. Relatively."
"Well, *I'm* bad at both politics and economics. Absolutely."

It was a girl's special spoiled selfishness, with exactly the wrong timing.

"I mean, we don't have to force ourselves to be in the same department. We'll still be at the same school, so we can see each other every day."
"Every day is good, but isn't the amount of time each day also important?"

It was a boundary to exclude a certain person, as though he and she were the only two people in the world.

"We'll already have plenty of lectures together in the general education course. Why rush that decision?"
"That's… a good point, I guess."

She knew that she was going entirely too fast.

That she was being incoherent.

"Instead of thinking that far ahead, we should make a promise for the immediate future. Once we've graduated, I want the three of us to do something together again. You, me, and Touma…"
"…"
"Setsuna?"
"Stay with me, Haruki-kun. Okay?"
"Huh? Yeah…"

She had known from the start that she was acting differently from usual.

Even so, she felt irritated with Haruki's inability to understand her incoherency.

"After we've started college, into our second year, third year, even if our departments are different…"
"Setsuna?"
"Even if I have to repeat a year, and end up under you…"
"I don't think you're going to have to repeat a year…"

Why did he insist upon taking such a vague attitude?

Why couldn't he scold her for being ridiculous?

And if that were impossible, why couldn't he just reject her?

"Well, um, well… If, um…"

Really, she knew from the start that Haruki couldn't possibly do anything like that, and agonized over what on earth must be wrong with her, seeking something so unreasonable…

"Hey, it's okay. I'm going to go turn the lights on…"
"No!"
"?!"

In the midst of all that agonizing, Setsuna's hands grabbed Haruki before she had realized it.

"Don't… We'll wake up from the dream."

Her heart was running back and forth and back and forth, but she couldn't keep her body from pushing ahead.

"Hey, Haruki-kun."
"Setsuna…?"

Setsuna's fingers wrapped around Haruki's fingers, one by one.

Mobilizing all her passion, tenderness, and warmth, taking him in.

The woman within Setsuna's body…

"Today, I want to keep dreaming."

No, no.

I can't dream.

"Standing under the spotlight, hearing their cheers, singing a song I love, loving every moment of it."

I can't think about the future I want.

I can't allow myself to do that.

"Everyone being happy for us…"

I can't betray a friend. I can't.

It's only been half a day.

She could finally be the best friend I've always wanted.

"Being praised by the one I like… Getting carried away, begging for a reward…"

The girl in Setsuna's head adamantly resisted.

"And that person would laugh a little bit, and shake his head at how spoiled I am, and then wrap me up in his arms…"

But, as her body moved in accordance with its desires, it refused to listen.

"Setsuna…"
"…But, this is a little different from what I pictured."

She held their entwined hands in front of her chest, buried her forehead in Haruki's chest.

"Being the one who made the move wasn't part of my plan."

…Having deliberately dropped her coat, of course.

Because she figured that her looking a little bit cold would lessen whatever guilt Haruki might feel in embracing her.

But, but…

What if I don't move now?

What if Touma-san's feelings reach Haruki-kun?

Would she be able to stand having me near the two of them?

"I'm usually completely passive, so I surprised myself a little, but… I've been waiting for so long that I think I'm allowed…"

No. I know she would be hurt.

Because she's so pure, because she loves him so earnestly.

Having me near them would be painful for her.

And she would hate herself for feeling that way.

…Just like I do, right now.

"…You know, it all just went smoothly like that. You know how dreams are…"

Haruki-kun will have to be the one to move first.

As Touma-san's boy, and as my friend.

So he can accept her confession, and keep his promise not to leave me.

…I'm sure he'll start keeping a little distance from me.

…Move away, so that he doesn't leave entirely.

"Oh, well… That's my fault for not managing to understand my own heart completely."
"Ah…"

No. No, I don't want that.

I don't know why I don't, but.

No, there are a million reasons. I just don't know which is the biggest.

"Hey, Haruki-kun…"

At last, the actions of her body ate all the way into her heart.

"You can move away, you know…"
"Setsuna… I…"

She abandoned everything to instinct, affirming only the desire welling up inside her…

"…"
"Ah…"

And, with precisely calculated timing, she closed her eyes.

…Timing so exquisite that she astonished herself, leaving him nowhere to run.

"Are you… sure?"

Feeling viciously jealous of the one within him, who caused him to hesitate.

Together with that cruel jealousy, she felt loathing for herself, for the third time.

"You really want me to…?"
"…"

And, finally…

If I want the three of us to stay together, I have to do this.

She shut her eyes, blocked her ears, and yielded her heart to this logic, which truly was how she felt, though she still wasn't confident in the result those feelings would bring.

"Setsuna…"
"Mm…"

…Her lips parted, just slightly.

Ah, ah…

I… did it. I did it…

"…"
"Mm, mm… mm!"

How awful can I be?

I'm so egotistical.

"Hah, ah… mph… ah, mm…"
"Hah, ah…"

Even though I know how Touma-san feels…

No, it's because I know how strong her feelings are that I'm doing this.

My own feelings swelled up as soon as I witnessed my rival's feelings…

I'm so awful, it's unbelievable.

"Mm… ah, hah…"
"Ah…"

But, but…

The one who snuck ahead first, the one who lied first…

"Hah, hah, haah… Aha…"
"…"

Ah, ah, ah…

Haruki-kun's breath…

I can feel it on me.

It's gathering in my mouth.

Together with the sensation of his lips.

Setsuna's first taste of this forbidden fruit was sweeter than she had ever imagined.

Sweet, slippery, and pleasant.

The sweetness brought a pleasure to the depths of her heart, to the innermost part of her body, such that she would never criticize or laugh at Kazusa's sweet tooth again.

His breathing… I wasn't expecting this.

I'm getting excited just from feeling his breath on me.

Is it because he's excited, too?

Or because my own excitement transferred to him? Which is it…?

Was it because the fruit that had entered her mouth was forbidden?

Or was it because she had truly, deeply wanted it…?

Oh, god…

What have I done?

I've betrayed Kazusa.

I forced these wicked feelings on Haruki-kun.

"Haah… Hff, mm, aha… ahaha…"
"Hah… ah…"

But, still…

"Sorry… Haruki-kun."
"Why are you… apologizing?"

Why?

Even though…

Even though I didn't just kiss him out of pure feeling for him…

"Well… it was my first kiss."
"Setsuna…"

Why am I this happy?

Happy that he's my first?

Happy that, as far as he knows, I'm his first?

She was shivering with delight.

Her heart was burning with intense emotion.

Ah, I…

I swallowed some of Haruki-kun's spit.

I did something that he hasn't done with Touma-san yet…

She gave her body up to her feelings both positive and negative, genuinely liking him, not wanting to let him go, strength and greed together.

My heart is throbbing. I like it.

My head is hot.

The moisture on my lips feels nice.

…I'm his first.

At that moment, Setsuna was in the same state of mind as Kazusa…

At last, she had reached the same strength of feeling as Kazusa's.

Setsuna couldn't even curse herself any more.

Because that would be the same as negating Kazusa, who bore the same feelings.

"I'm sorry…"

So, for the moment, all that she could let fall from her mouth…

Was a roar of dark victory, words of the devil wrapped in an apology.

After the Festival: Setsuna's Thirty Minutes Analysis

This story is comparatively brief—not only in length, but also in the amount of time covered—which makes it all the more effective as an insight into Setsuna's character. The reader is given a moment-by-moment narration of her thought process in that half hour, her feelings, the way her mind and body work against each other as she grapples with her impulses and desires. In the end, even though she ends up following what her body wants, she doesn't entirely understand why, or how deep that desire really goes.

Perhaps Setsuna's biggest misunderstanding is in her belief that she is significantly different from Kazusa where Haruki is concerned. Obviously she has acknowledged that she and Kazusa both love Haruki, and she laments that the two of them couldn't simply savor their "middle-school love" mutually; but she is under the impression that Kazusa's love for Haruki is deeper and more serious than her own, and that that difference would be the primary barrier to the "best friends who share feelings for the same person" relationship she'd had notions of. As far as she's concerned, *Kazusa* is the only one who can't keep her priorities straight between friendship and love. Setsuna actually does a fair bit of speculating and assuming concerning Kazusa's feelings and reactions to various potential developments, the pain Kazusa might feel according to which action Setsuna takes—without the same level of consideration for her own feelings and reactions. This may be why her body seems to act out of sync with her mind, when really she just isn't aware enough of her heart.

The arc of this story lines up in a compelling way with that of the side story, *Twinkle Snow Reverie.* It begins with Setsuna deciding to give up on Haruki romantically, and support Kazusa. It continues as Setsuna convinces herself that she'll be all right with Haruki and Kazusa being together, as long as the three of them can keep being a trio—though it becomes clearer as time goes on, to the reader if not to Setsuna herself, that it isn't going to be that simple. It ends with Setsuna finally failing to quash her own feelings for Haruki, and acting on them, because she underestimated how strong they were. In both stories, she does so much *thinking,* pondering, considering, weighing options, occasionally agonizing, and little real listening to herself, until it's too late. This is why she fails to recognize that her love is as deep as Kazusa's, and that therefore she will suffer just as much as Kazusa if she is relegated to the "number two" position in Haruki's heart.

In this moment in Music Room #2, the demonstrated repercussions of this lack of self-awareness are on a somewhat different order of magnitude from the side story, which covers more time, but similar in nature. Setsuna believes she is doing what must be done in order to keep the balance that she wants. She realizes, after some more conjecture, that she doesn't like the thought of Haruki putting her at any distance for Kazusa's sake, but doesn't know exactly why the thought distresses her so much. She curses herself for feeling jealous, for taking such calculated actions as getting Haruki to put her jacket on for her, for fooling him into doing what she wants; but at the same time, she finds herself thrilling at the idea of Haruki seeing her as his first kiss, the idea that she has kissed Haruki in a way that Kazusa hasn't yet. These are not thoughts that fit with her ideal of "balance," but she hasn't reached a point where she can parse them and deal with them rationally. It is only to the reader that the contradictions in her thoughts and wishes are clearly apparent. This leaves an uneasy mood at the end of the story—the knowledge that something has been set in motion, which is unlikely to end without some serious strife. Being led through it step-by-step in this way only makes the tension more painful

His God, Her Saviour

"Really… Huh."
"Yep. Well, I mean, I got all this second-hand from Takeya, but…"

It was lunchtime in class 3-A, and the two girls spoke just loudly enough to hear each other, while still quiet enough to blend in with the rest of the clamor around them.

"In the same class, in the seat right next to his…"
"She's really kind of a weirdo. I mean, she doesn't even remotely fit in with the rest of the class, so Haruki's got his work cut out for him."
"And the only person she talks to is Kitahara-kun…?"

The name of this young lady, whose every gesture—even in this moment, as she simply pondered—exuded loveliness, leaving the other female students around her with a distinct sense of unfairness, was Setsuna Ogiso.

A perfect beauty, who in spite of various flashy titles—Miss Houjou High for two years running, the number-one idol on campus, the conquering queen—was still possessed of a sociability that kept her from suffering *too* much jealousy from other girls. Her perfection was almost a nuisance.

"Has Haruki not told you about that? You know he's trying to bring her in?"

And the name of the young lady speaking with this perfect beauty, who managed somehow to evade that sense of unfairness better than anyone else in the class, was Io Mizusawa.

With her personality that showed no distinction between male and female, and her looks that let her boast enormous popularity with the lowerclassmen in particular, she was the only one in the class who would speak this candidly with Setsuna.

"No, I haven't heard any kind of gossip like that."
"Yeah, I guess you two have only really known each other for like a week."
"…Th-That's not what I mean! I mean Kitahara-kun isn't the kind of person to just chat about people's private lives so easily. Even if he did, he would make sure to get the person's direct permission first."
"Wow, you've got a pretty detailed picture of him, considering it's only been a week."
"I'm just… speaking from my own experience."
"…Only a week, and you've already been baptized into that world of contracts."

What Setsuna had heard from him was not gossip, but a boast.

A boast given with a certain dreamy look in his eyes, that made her feel just a bit queasy…

The name of the "weirdo" currently dominating their conversation was Kazusa Touma.

Certain circumstances had led Setsuna to learn her name now, in her third year of high school, and it seemed quite possible that they would become more deeply involved…

"Anyway, with a personality like hers, she's had a hard time getting along with anyone since our first year…"

Although, Setsuna had been aware of her *existence* since first year.

She had spotted her a number of times through the window in the other school building, or on the way to and from school.

In fact, she had been seared powerfully into Setsuna's memory from the first time she saw her…

Because her looks drew the eye like no other.

No one could fail to take notice of her tall stature, her long, glossy black hair.

Her outstanding figure, at a point of perfection that allowed no one to get near her.

And her keen, sharp beauty, exemplified in her long, narrow eyes.

Anyone in her class who failed to notice her existence until their third year would have to have no interest in women, or else a particularly strange idea of beauty.

"So, I don't think she's likely to join up. I know you guys are hoping for it, but…"
"…Won't she?"
"Even if she did, there'd just be more trouble on the back end. She could cause more problems than she solved."
"Problems…?"
"Yeah, she doesn't get along with *anyone.* There's not really anything you can do about that."
"No one…?"

Setsuna recalled the first few words she'd exchanged with her a few days before, hardly even enough to consider a conversation.

Kazusa Touma… hadn't seemed like the aloof girl she was made out to be.

If one counted the harsh words she had thrown at her classmate there on the spot, she could hardly be called taciturn; and as for the cold attitude that she apparently took with everyone, if one thought of her reactions to her classmate, it seemed for all the world like joking around between friends.

Well, maybe she just wasn't her usual self because she had that classmate right there.

"The way you're talking, it sounds like you think you might be able to pull her into your group after all."

No…

“Do I… want to do that?”
“Not sure why you’re asking me…”

Maybe her attitude when she was with her classmate, Haruki Kitahara… was her real, usual self.

His God, Her Saviour – II

"Are you friggin' serious, Haruki?!"

"You got Setsuna Ogiso to join your band? *The* Setsuna Ogiso?!"
"How the hell did that happen? I mean, how did you even convince her?"
"You know what this means, right? You can talk to Ogiso-san whenever you want, now!"
"I really respect you, man. The talent it took setting everything up perfectly so you wouldn't lose out on a chance like this…"
"…Guys, please just let me eat lunch."

It was lunchtime in class 3-E, and shouts of incredulity resounded through the room, not drowned out in the least by the rest of the clamor around them.

"Like, seriously, this is earth-shattering."
"You got *Ogiso.* Miss Houjou High, three years running."
"No, the voting for this year isn't finished yet…"
"God, how did you trick her into it?"
"I told you, I… Hey, no, I didn't trick her into anything. Don't use confusion as an opportunity to start deriding people."

The name of this young man, who never let the opportunity for a lecture slip by, even when he was stuck for words otherwise, who was constantly dealing with this kind of clangoring from the other male students around him, was Haruki Kitahara.

Incidentally, that word, "clangoring," was one that a certain close friend of his came up with to describe his situation, and the improper word usage bothered Haruki a good deal more than what it described.

"Look, I just went out on a limb and asked her, and she agreed, and that's all there was to it. You think maybe you guys just gave up too early?"
"Oh, no, no way."
"Dude, do you have any idea how many brave souls have asked her out and been completely sunk?"
"No, I don't."
"Yeah, me neither."
"Wait, then why would you…"
"The list of casualties is so long that no one knows. But anyone can tell you how many heroes have survived. Zero."
"I'm pretty sure the kinds of proposals you all make to her are completely different from the one I made…"

Setting that aside, the name of the "*The* Setsuna Ogiso" currently dominating their conversation was… Setsuna Ogiso, obviously.

Certain circumstances had led Haruki to exchange words with her for the first time now, in his third year of high school, and it seemed quite possible that they would become more deeply involved…

To sum it up, she was the newest member of the Light Music Club to which Haruki belonged.

An impromptu vocalist, for an impromptu school festival band. The festival was only a month away.

And, as those all around them said, she was a perfect beauty, bearing various flashy titles—Miss Houjou High for two years running, the number-one idol on campus, the conquering queen.

"Anyway, we don't wanna hear whatever kinda fantasy about Ogiso just smiling and nodding for you. That just wouldn't happen."
"How many times do I have to tell you? She agreed to it, no hesitation."

That was a lie, of course.

Setsuna had nodded to Haruki's proposal eventually, but the time leading up to it had been teeming with various troubles, twists and turns, and unexpected developments.

But, given just how distant all those details were likely to be from the details his classmates imagined, there wasn't much point in trying to explain…

Because the Setsuna that Haruki knew was completely different from the Ogiso everybody else knew—a hard worker, sympathetic, prevented by the various ties and obligations jerking her around from living the modest life that she might have preferred.

"Anyway, calm down. It's not time to get all stoked up yet."
"Why not? You've got Ogiso to sing for you!"
"I mean, you've basically already won! It's gonna be standing room only when you guys are on, no question."
"Yeah, I guess everything's good for the vocals, but then there's also…"

"…"

With this last remark, Haruki threw a glance to one side, landing on the form of a girl slumped over onto a desk by the window.

The name of this girl, who slept like a log from the start of class to the end, who was treated by all of her classmates—save for one—as though she simply didn't exist… was, indeed, Kazusa Touma.

A simply burdensome beauty, who was kept at a distance by absolutely everyone because of the various less-than-flattering titles she bore—weirdo, black sheep, aloof lone wolf.

Even now, in accordance with her reputation, she was snoozing peacefully, evidently unbothered by the clamor around her, uninterested in anything.

…The fact that everyone else believed this so firmly was also thanks to the delinquent-like way in which she always conducted herself.

"…"

In actuality, she hadn't been sleeping at all, this entire time. Rather, she *couldn't* sleep.

Because every single time the boys next to her said that name—"Setsuna Ogiso"—it grated against her nerves.

Certain circumstances had led Kazusa, in her third year, et cetera…

That said, it would have been difficult for Kazusa… or for anyone in their same school, really, *not* to know her name.

Through the window in the other school building, on the way to and from school… Really, if there was a ring of people anywhere, she was usually in the middle of it.

Kazusa could try to look away, but everybody else around was always looking in the same direction, so it was impossible for her own eyes not to be drawn, too.

Her smile that inspired goodwill in anyone who saw it.

Her positive presence, that calmed her surroundings and then made them more brilliant.

And her gentle loveliness, exemplified in her wide, softly sloping eyes.

Anyone in her class year—no, in her same school at all—who failed to have an interest in her… would have to be a pessimistic truant, like Kazusa.

No, that wasn't true.

—What the hell is her deal?

In fact, right now, Kazusa was stuck in a situation that all but forced her to take an extraordinary interest in Setsuna Ogiso.

She recalled the first few words she'd exchanged with Setsuna a few days before, hardly even enough to consider a conversation.

Setsuna Ogiso… was exactly the idol everybody said she was.

Just as her reputation claimed, and perfectly in line with her image, she dealt with Kazusa and her bandmate with a bright, refreshing attitude, drawn from her charming face, voice, and mannerisms.

The one thing that differed just slightly from her reputation was a certain sense of distance.

Not between her and Kazusa, naturally, but between her and her bandmate…

"…"

At that time, Kazusa realized instinctively that she and Setsuna were of types that just didn't match.

Setsuna was like the sun, a figure of light and purity, different from her in every possible way.

A truly strong hero, who had always been given special treatment, in a good way.

Her honest heart, showing her feelings for whomever she was speaking with right there in her face.

All of it made her the *second* difficult person Kazusa had had to deal with this year.

Kazusa never took any interest in anyone. She shouldn't have had any reason to find someone "difficult." And yet…

"Hey, Touma, where are you going?"
"…"

He spoke to her the moment she stood, planning to go and cool off her irritation somewhere, as though he had been watching her the whole time—the one who had been at the heart of all the noise just now, the *first* difficulty she'd faced this year.

"Lunch break is almost over. Aren't you going to eat anything?"
"…What, does being the committee chair mean you have to keep an eye on the whole class's nutrition, too? That's rough."
"No, it doesn't, but you'll get tired if you don't take in three proper meals a day."
"Exactly. I'm tired. Quit talking to me. You're pissing me off."
"Touma…"

And Kazusa faced him, receiving him with an even colder glare and tone of voice than usual.

There was no doubt that this was an unreasonable attitude to take—very much like her—but, with the state of mind she was in, she had to distract herself *somehow.*

Because he, himself, was the root of every part of her present rotten mood.

He had brought Setsuna to her, when they were plainly like oil and water.

He had spoken enthusiastically of Setsuna, in weirdly excited tones.

Said that Setsuna had saved the band, saved him.

Said that Setsuna was his only ally.

Only Setsuna…

"…? You look pale. Touma, are you sick, or…"
"…N-No, I'm fine! Back off!"
"Ah…"

Shaking off the hand that Haruki had reached out to her in worry, Kazusa rushed out of the room, making her escape.

Her own thoughts were giving her a strange, itchy feeling, and it disgusted her.

She was used to feeling inferior, but the target of that inferiority complex was so completely divergent from the usual one this time.

"Ah…"

The moment she made it out into the hallway, shutting the door somewhat forcefully behind her, Kazusa swallowed the sigh that she had nearly just heaved.

"Ah…"

Right before her destination, class 3-E, Setsuna caught her breath and froze in place.

"…"
"…"

They stood ten steps apart, eyes rooted to one another.

—Touma-san.

—Setsuna Ogiso.

Even though each of them was vividly aware that the other one was looking at her, neither of them realized that her own gaze was fixed on the other.

So, each of them, believing that she was acting perfectly casual, slowly—and now, awkwardly—began walking again.

Toward the other.

—She really is good-looking, huh…

Without really meaning to, Setsuna compared herself against Kazusa.

She'd always thought she had about three centimeters left to grow, but the classmate standing before her was easily five centimeters taller than she was.

As for her hair, she'd assumed hers was just about as long as it was going to get, but the sleek black hair fluttering before her was easily ten centimeters longer than hers.

And there was the matter of cup size, too. Setsuna had been hoping to go up just one more, at least, but here…

—I guess she's what they would call "cute."

Kazusa found something indescribably unreasonable in Setsuna's bearing.

Compared with her own overall large physique, Setsuna's build was exquisitely balanced, as though figured according to the golden ratio.

Compared with her eyes, which had no merit except in frightening people off, Setsuna's eyes were large and clear, slightly upturned, guaranteed to attract attention.

And more than anything, there was her true appeal, which couldn't be surmised from her looks alone, as Kazusa had heard any number of times from a certain source…

And so, even with their blunt, blatant mutual stares, they still mutually feigned indifference.

"…"
"…"

Those ten steps passed by, taking less than ten seconds, though it felt like ten hours.

And for some reason, at the moment that they passed one another, each of them showed a faint sense of defeat in her face.

And, as Kazusa climbed the stairs at the end of the hallway…

"…Phew."

As Setsuna placed her hand on the door to class E…

"…Hmm."

In one brief instant, the two of them disappeared from the hallway.

As each of them turned over her shoulder one last time, the other wasn't looking at her.

But, in fact, that was just because of a small time lag.

Which of them turned first, which of them was looking at the other at the final moment, was a chicken race that meant one win and one loss for each of them.

However, because there was no referee present to judge the outcome, that meaningless sense of defeat, that unaccountable fatigue, leaned all the more heavily on both of them at once.

Even so, unwilling to let these inexplicable murky feelings hang around forever, they muttered to themselves, almost simultaneously:

"All right!"

Setsuna tightened her small fist.

"…All right."

Kazusa looked out the window, up at the sky.

—I should try talking to her!

—I should avoid letting this involvement get any deeper.

Each of them stashed away a small resolution in her heart.

Twinkle Snow ~Dream~

Prologue

"Listen, Touma…"

"I… I've liked you ever since I first met you."

"What do I care about your feelings?"

"The only feelings I trust are my own."

"…I love you."

Twinkle Snow ~Dream~ I

"You don't have to grip it that hard. Just pull it straight toward you, like this."
"Mm…"

It was December.

The leaves had finally vanished from all the street-side trees, and in their place, an enormous tree had suddenly sprung up in front of the station—a tree signifying a particular day, all asserting the winter season.

"Oh, you're supposed to hold the sprouts there, not right by the knife."
"What do you mean, 'there'?"

The school festival—the final glimmer of their school life—had ended, and now that they were third years, they had no choice but to think on the four grey months that remained to them.

"Ah, you sliced that one a bit too thick. There won't be as much to eat."
"…"

Although, considering most of the students already knew where they were going (a strong point, or perhaps a weak point, of having a high school already attached to a university), the greyness was really less than half.

And, within that, if you took out the strong ones and losers who had been referred to other universities, and those who had found employment already, the number remaining was in the hundreds.

"All right, we'll stop there."
"Phew…"
"So, we've got five potatoes left, two carrots, and…"
"…"

For those in that chosen minority, these days were fierce, desperate…

"Aaaargh, how am I supposed to peel something this tiny?!"
"Wait, no, you can't just stop in the middle, Kazusa."

Days of battle… supposedly. Until thirty minutes ago.

"God, cooking is boring."
"We've only just started…"

The name of the young lady with long, lustrous black hair, relaxing in a kitchen chair, having just given up on the task of peeling potatoes after a single attempt, was Kazusa Touma.

Houjou High School, class 3-E. Her habit of dozing off at the edge of the classroom, never standing out, may have been her downfall; now, she boasted extremely bleak

circumstances, with three months left before graduation and no settled path or prospects.

"I wasn't made for delicate work like this. It's not my calling."
"Don't talk like that. You're a pianist. That's the most delicate work there is."

And the name of the young lady with moderately long hair gathered into two pigtails, who had been tapping rhythmically with her own carving knife while still managing to give a proper follow-up to everything Kazusa said, was Setsuna Ogiso.

Houjou High School, class 3-A. She had put a suitable amount of effort into maintaining the sweet image that had always led everyone to look on her with admiration, whether she liked it or not; now, she contented herself with her promising future, having easily secured a recommendation to Houjou University.

"Exactly, I'm a pianist. What happens if I cut my finger on one of these things?"
"But you were the one who brought it up! You were worried you might end up a woman who couldn't even make a curry."
"And then *you're* the one who decided we actually needed to make it. I thought we were here to study for exams…"
"Well, *someone* came and clung to me desperately…"

Yet again… it was December.

Exams started tomorrow, which meant their school days ought to be growing more and more hurried, in a certain unpleasant way.

And yet, for some reason, those who had gathered at the Ogiso family home for the sake of helping the lazy pianist and her dicey graduation prospects were now working diligently at preparing dinner in the kitchen—except for one.

"Hey, are you *sure* you don't need my help?"
"Back off. Go back to studying in the bedroom by yourself."
"…Remind me again who this study party was for in the first place?"

The name of the young man with nothing of particular note about his hair, who now poked his head out of the hallway, seemingly at loose ends, was Haruki Kitahara.

"Anyway, you can just leave the dinner prep to us."
"To 'us'… I see."
"If all three of us do it, it'll go faster. We need to eat quickly so we can get back to studying. You haven't even finished the first subject yet."

Houjou High School, class 3-E. With his strict, unswayable policy of helping others, and his preachy personality on top of it, he had provided direction to a number of school organizations, both from the inside and from the outside; now, he had fallen into a rosy future, having been guaranteed not only a recommendation to Houjou University, but also the formal address at their graduation.

"Shut up. If we *did* let you help, you'd just stand there nitpicking every damn thing. I know you've never done any cooking, either."
"Maybe, but peeling potatoes is something anyone can do."
"Oh, yes, if you've got the patience."
"Setsuna… If there's something you're trying to say, keep your mouth shut."

Kazusa, unable to continue blatantly slacking off now that Haruki had entered the scene, reluctantly stood next to Setsuna again and picked up a carrot, which seemed like it should be easier to peel.

"A-Anyway! …Don't you dare tell him what I said earlier!"

…Under which pretense, she now muttered right into Setsuna's ear.

"What you said earlier?"
"Y-You know. The bit about being a woman who couldn't even make a curry."
"The part where you can't make a curry? Or the part where you were worried to death that he would hate you because of it?"
"Ah! Gaaah!"
"The second one, got it."
"…You're scarier than you look."

To reiterate, it was December.

Almost two weeks had passed… since Haruki and Kazusa became boyfriend and girlfriend.

Two weeks ago…

The school festival concert ended a massive success.

The praise and encores for Setsuna, who had displayed not only her expected loveliness but also an entirely unexpected singing ability, were unending; the admiration for Kazusa, who supported everything perfectly from off to the side, handling keyboards, saxophone, and bass, was generous as well; and Haruki, the guitarist who did all he could within his scope, received his own share of applause.

"Hm…"
"S-So? How is it?"
"How? …Well, it's jab curry."
"…You know, it's hard to tell whether you're doing it on purpose or whether you're just like that, but god, you're brutal."
"The *taste,* Haruki-kun! Give us your thoughts!"
"Well, as the catch copy says, it's got a hard-hitting bitterness, and a deep, robust flavor."
"Ugh, screw this! I shouldn't have tried to feed someone who refuses to

acknowledge other people's effort!"
"K-Kazusa… Haruki-kun, come on!"
"I like it. I always have, ever since I started liking bitter stuff in middle school."
"What…"
"Is there enough for seconds?"
"…"
"It tastes good, okay? As good as it always does."

Two hours after those fifteen amazing minutes…

In the twilit music room #2, which had served as their changing room, the two backing band members who had put everything into lifting up their singing idol confirmed their feelings for one another.

"…More, please."
"What, I, wait… Setsunaaa…!"
"More, please, Kazusa."
"Y-Yeah, okay… I'll go get some more."
"Make sure to really heap it on!"
"I know, I know!"

Which was why the female member of the backing band now reacted with such nervousness to the curt, slightly unkind words of praise from the male member of the backing band.

"Pff… Heehee… Ahaha!"
"…What's so funny?"
"Did you see how many expressions Kazusa went through just now?"

Which was why the idol now failed to hold her laughter back as she watched the overreaction of the female member of the backing band, practically bouncing out of the room with curry dish in hand.

"Did I screw something up?"
"You might have been juuust a little tactless. All you had to do was take one bite and say, 'Oh, this is good!'"
"But, using store-bought roux… No, you know what, you're right. I'm sorry."
"Though, it did mean I got to see Kazusa on the verge of tears, so it's all A-OK where I'm concerned."
"…You *really* are scarier than you look."

And so, even though the concert had ended, the three of them never truly left the stage, carrying on those dreamlike hours.

The two lovebirds, and the Cupid who brought them together—the three of them.

Two hours later.

"No, look, I did say that it tasted good."
"Yes, because jab curry is good. It tastes the same regardless of who makes it."

After dinner, the night wore on in chitchat under the excuse of "taking a break," completely ignoring Haruki's attempts to get the study party back on track.

"I had three helpings and everything. You seemed pretty happy."
"Yeah, you threw me off pretty good. Turns out I'm cheap enough now that even completely insincere crap like that gets me all fluttery."

And so, having had no real accomplishments on the studying front, but more than enough to make up for it on the nourishment front, they departed the Ogiso household, bearing mandarins as their spoils of war.

"Seriously, you don't have to snap like that… It really made me glad."
"Oh, of course. Doesn't really matter how it's made, it's still that store-bought flavor you love…"
"It's because it tasted like… Mom's cooking, to me."
"Huh…?"

Beneath the wintry sky, the topic finally returned to Haruki's reaction as he ate the curry earlier.

"She would make a ton of it in a pot at the beginning of the month… I'd heat it up and eat it later."
"…"
"The side dishes all set out on the table were always ready-made, but…"
"Mom made the curry herself, however it turned out… Well, though she did use store-bought roux."
"We never ate together, morning, noon, or night…"
"But I was always just a little bit happier on the days that our kitchen smelled like curry."
"…"

Haruki stared up at the sky. The stars looked as though they could turn to ice and start pouring down at any moment.

His breaths turned white and floated upward, covering over the myriad stars like clouds.

His face showed happiness, and fond familiarity, to be sure—but also the slightest hint of desolation.

"So, today, I really did…"
"You…"
"Hm?"
"…You were trying to distract me again, just now. Just throwing out a bunch of lazy excuses."
"…You could tell?"

…But the fact that the whole thing was just for show didn't get past Kazusa, who had already taken the "girlfriend" brand, even though it had only been two weeks.

"You're using all that lame nostalgia stuff to run away. Cut it out. My mother never made me so much as a piece of toast."
"Yeah, that… does sound like Youko Touma."
"I've told you before, the fact that your past is so boring is a *good* thing. Mostly…"
"Well, in that case…"
"What."
"Maybe I'll make you some curry next time?"
"…Huh?"

So, when Haruki made this offer, Kazusa raised her eyebrows, seemingly suspicious that this, too, might be for show…

"As thanks for today. Once all the tests are over."
"…What are you…"
"I might not be able to mix a lot of spices together, but… Maybe I'll do some messing around with the ingredients and try for a seafood curry."
"I'd… rather have pudding, than curry."

But, the delay in her grand response when she did accept the offer already flagged her for the loser.

"Can I use a pudding mix? The kind where you just add milk and chill it until it's firmed up."
"Only if you make three packets' worth. I want a full bowl."
"It'll lose its shape if I do that…"
"I don't care. I'll just eat it right out of the bowl with a spoon."
"…I almost don't want to ask this, but are you planning on eating the whole thing in one sitting?"
"Well, *you* ate three helpings of curry today. It's basically the same amount."
"The nutritional balance is completely different! It's almost entirely sugar and butterfat!"

And so, beneath the wintry sky, the two of them walked on through the silent residential area, pondering the pudding to come as their reward in a few days, with an energy that might be considered a nuisance to the neighborhood.

"…"
"…"

Thirty-five minutes after that…

It was fifteen minutes on foot from the Ogiso residence to Suetsugu Station, then ten minutes to Iwazu Station by train, and then a further ten minutes' walk.

At some point, as they walked through the neighborhood, keeping the long, white wall to their left, the words they exchanged lessened considerably.

"…"
"…"

Because this white wall surrounded the mansion of a certain world-famous pianist—in other words, once they turned left at the next street corner…

"…What?"
"Oh, no… Sorry."

Only a few more steps, and they would no longer have a reason to keep walking together…

With a deeply sorry look on his face, the boy began to wrap his free hand—the one not carrying a bag of mandarins—around the girl's free hand, the one not carrying a bag of mandarins.

"Why now?"

The eyes of the girl, Kazusa, upturned and slightly reproachful, wavered and shone by the faint light of the streetlamps.

Her gaze and words were difficult to interpret—she could have been admonishing Haruki for this sudden burst of initiative, or she could have been demanding to know why he had waited this long to do it.

"You don't want this?"
"No, I don't."
"O-Oh, okay. I'm sorry…"
"I don't want you to think I'm gross."
"Huh?"

During this short exchange, their hands repeatedly touched and parted, let go and took hold again.

"My hands aren't like most girls' hands."
"Ah…"
"My fingers are harder and rougher than yours, or most guys', for that matter."

Attacking, retreating, hesitating, vacillating.

"I would never think that was gross."
"But…"

"I mean, they're my teacher's hands."
"…"

And the boy finally mustered up all the courage he had, and cut off his path of retreat…

Finally, he entwined his own fingers around the girl's fingers, which were just as rough as she said they were.

"I told you… I love this proof of your hard work. I love your piano-playing."

They really were hard.

She might have slacked off continuously in the two years since she entered the high school, but she had been tempered so thoroughly in her childhood that that hardness was preserved the whole time…

No, maybe she only claimed to be slacking off, but could never really stay away from the piano—and these fingers were filled with stubbornness and pride.

"Why are you getting all mushy? It's not like you. That's just embarrassing."
"Who cares? We're alone."
"Put yourself in my place, okay? I'm already about to freeze as it is, and now I have to listen to these lame lines."
'Then I'll warm you up, like this…"
"Ah… Hey…"

The mandarin bags slipped out of their grips, and now they clasped together their newly free hands as well.

Their entire hands were tightly entwined—not just their palms, but their fingers, too.

They faced each other, not walking, casting aside all their excuses.

"…You're the one who said you wanted to do this, okay?"
"Yes."
"All of this is what *you* wanted."
"Yes."
"So, so… I'm not gonna let you let go. Okay?"
"Yeah."
"You'd better keep hanging on until I say, 'Let go.'"
"I won't let go, Kazusa."
"…Haruki…"

Two weeks had passed since they started dating.

Two weeks, since they began calling each other by their first names.

"…But why are you still looking at me like that?"

Kazusa Touma was the same dour-looking girl she had always been.

"You look like you're gonna cry…"
"…"

However, these were not the eyes of a lone wolf, rejecting everything, as she had before—more like those of a stray dog, that had just been fed, just tasted the forbidden fruit, for the first time in its life…

"We're dating, you know? We're flirting right now."
"Why does everything you say have to be so lame?"
"Because I want you to laugh. Just a bit."
"This is… all on me."
"But…"
"When I might lose you, when we might separate, when I might wake up from this dream…"
"Ah…"
"Thinking about that stuff, all the goddamn time… That's all on me."
"Kazusa…"

Kazusa Touma was no longer aloof.

"You won't go anywhere, will you, Haruki?"

But, she was just as cowardly as she'd ever been.

"You won't just disappear, like Mom?"

She was hesitant to like anyone this way.

Betrayal was all she could imagine.

She was a girl who had only just learned to love someone, and all her reactions were extreme.

"Well… Will you close your eyes?"
"Okay…"
"…Why are you shutting them that tight?"
"Because… Well, because… You're gonna do it, right?"
"Yeah, I am."
"Then, hurry up… Get it over with."
"Why do you have to talk like that? It ruins the mood."
"Look, I'm… I'm embarrassed, okay?"

But, little by little…

The littlest bit by the littlest bit, she was regaining her honest self. She was still in that transitional stage.

"Y'know, I like it when your voice breaks like that…"
"S-Stupid… mph?! Mm, mmm…"

A mere twenty steps remained until the entrance to the Touma house.

Kazusa knew that she would warm up far more quickly if she simply went straight inside, but she couldn’t move now.

Not until her master’s magic spell—“Wait”—wore off.

Twinkle Snow ~Dream~ II

"Man, after all of that, the end of the semester really flew by, huh!"
"Which 'all of that' are we talking about…?"
"I'm sleepy…"
"…Hmph."

After "all of that"…

The madness of exam week had passed in an instant, and with Saturday's English test, everything drew to a happy conclusion.

"…You seemed pretty deep in it, Haruki. Were you trying to hit the top in every subject, just to crown it off?"
"I wouldn't waste effort on something that inefficient… All I needed was to hit the average in each subject."
"Wow, you're pretty articulate for someone who's asleep."
"Look, there's been a lot going on. Graduation's coming up and all… Also, I'll have you know *I'm* awake."

In the cafeteria, which was less populated than usual, four people took up one table, digesting their sense of freedom in the aftermath of their exams.

Haruki, his self-proclaimed best friend Takeya Iizuka, his partner-in-crime, both in name and nature, Io Mizusawa, and…

"…Zzzz…"
"…Hey, Patrasche. Wake up before you freeze to death."
"Hnn…?"

Next to Haruki, who was fighting with every ounce of his strength to keep his bleary eyes open, there was Kazusa, who had long since crashed out with all of her god-given elegance.

"Touma-san, haven't you been a little too relaxed lately? In a few different senses."
"Haruki, you already managed to make enemies of ninety percent of the guys here back during the school festival, and yet you're aggressive enough to pick a fight with the last ten percent…"

To Kazusa, who had let all the strength drain out of her, body and soul, to lean her head defenselessly against her boyfriend's shoulder, and to Haruki, who accepted this behavior as though it were completely natural, the other two spoke with exasperation.

Even to Takeya and Io, who had a fair enough grasp of how things had gotten this way, when compared with the sense of emptiness that the crew from class E had been feeling lately, the two of them must have looked like puppies clinging to each other.

"Hey, don't rub at your eyes like that. I know you're sleepy, but you can use my handkerchief…"
"Who're you calling 'Patrasche'? Does that make you Nello? You're no artist. You can't even hardly play the guitar. If you ever got your hands on a Rubens painting you'd probably use the back as a calculation sheet or something."

And in response to their words, which had been fired off like a belch, the barely-awake puppy and her groggier-than-usual brain rerouted the blow toward the day after tomorrow.

"The whole Touma family fortune wouldn't be enough for that. I prefer living with clothes on my back, thanks."
"See, this is what I mean about you saying stuff like that… you're such a drag, Haruki."

She looked like nothing if not a whining dog at the moment, which only gave the other two further heartburn, together with a vague sense of helplessness.

"I know you're embarrassed and trying to cover it up, but would you mind knocking it off, maybe?"
"No one's doing anything like that. *He's* the one who…"
"Setsuna-chan will probably be back before long…"
"…"
"…"

Takeya recalled correctly—in fact, with timing that almost seemed perfectly planned to coincide with his words, the atmosphere at the table returned to the state it had been in when they first gathered.

"Oh, good, there you are! Thanks for waiting!"

Yes, as though it had been planned in advance, Setsuna's lively voice reached them not ten seconds later.

"You know, they say artists have a different level of sensitivity from normal people…"
"Hm?"

In accordance with an emphatic suggestion from one person in particular, they had settled on the karaoke place in front of the station—said person's home ground—as the location for their end-of-exams party.

As Setsuna guided them all to the spot in question, Io caught up with her, and put forth her hushed remark in such a way that those behind them couldn't hear, just as they entered the stationfront shopping area.

"She's got this really childish side, you know what I mean?"
"Yeah, it's cute!"
"I guess so… It's totally different from my first impression of her."

"Well… It happens a lot with girls. Right? You know what I mean."
"Right, yeah, that…"

'When you're in love,' etc…

…They were both too embarrassed to say it aloud, but each still managed to understand perfectly what the other was trying not to say.

"Except, you have to be careful not to tease her too much, which is a little tricky…"
"Yeah, I know what you mean. She can't really take a joke… where a *certain* topic is concerned."

In only a month, Kazusa had undergone a dramatic change.

She reacted dramatically to mentions of a certain topic—which is to say, Haruki. To give a few examples, she could become angry, shy, or stubborn, or be brought to the point of tears, at the drop of a hat.

Io felt a bit as though the girl she'd teased in elementary school had come back around again, exactly as she was, and it made her feel weirdly uncomfortable.

"She's just *so* pure, and earnest, and… precious, I think."
"…Uh, um… Try not to get discouraged, okay?"

And, just now, she realized that she had stepped on a landmine that was an entirely different sort of uncomfortable.

"Oh, no, I'm not feeling down at all, really!"

It wasn't clear who had realized and who hadn't, but Setsuna herself at least must have been aware of her own feelings.

"I got rejected, y'know?"
"Setsuna…"
"I didn't listen to your advice, and… Well, no, I think it would have happened this way even if I had. The point is, I lost to Kazusa, completely."

"If you're serious about him, you should probably hurry."

"And I know that this was the best way for the whole thing to end, anyway."

The result was exactly as Io had feared.

But, apparently, it was just how Setsuna wanted it to be.

"This way, the three of us can keep being a trio. It was the best choice."
"A trio…"
"Haruki-kun is still plenty nice to me, and Kazusa and I are finally best friends!"

Yes, Setsuna and Kazusa had become best friends.

Up on the rooftop, at dusk, the week after the school festival.

"Can I… call you 'Kazusa,' from now on?"

"Ogiso…"

"…Try again."

"…Setsuna…!"

"So, this is all I need."

There, again, was Kazusa, on the verge of crying like a child.

There, again, was Setsuna, smiling slightly impishly.

"The two of them granted my wish."
"Really."
"Yep, really."

The two of them had sworn an oath for the three of them.

The third one hadn't been consulted at all on the matter, but Setsuna knew.

"Then, keep it up, Setsuna."
"There's nothing to keep up! Everything is happy and fun right now. Why would I need to force something else?"

She knew that this was the future the third person wanted the most…

"If you say so… Well, if anything happens, you can come to us. Whatever little complaints you might have, we'll listen."
"…Why are you talking like my problems are your problems, Io?"
"No, I mean, I…"
"You two have a different problem to solve, right? A real nuisance of a problem, that hasn't had a single step of progress after six years."
"What…?!"

At this proof that she had correctly guessed the other figure included in the "we" Io spoke of, Setsuna fired back.

"Once you've done something about that, we'll let you into our group. Until then, you two need to put some work into it. Oh, I'll listen to any little complaints you might have, though."
"H-Hey, Setsuna…"
"There's no spring coming for me… But only me. Not a bad start to a new school term, right?

As Io came to a halt, shocked, Setsuna gave her a wink—the kind she would never give a boy.

"Come on, guys, hurry up! The daytime discount only lasts until six!"

And Setsuna left her there, quickening her steps.

"Hang on, how many hours are you planning to sing…?"

By the time Io managed to mutter a retort, Setsuna was no longer looking at her. She couldn't see her face.

In only a month, Setsuna had undergone a subtle change.

More of her walls seemed to have been demolished now. To give a few examples, she was a little chattier, a little meaner, a little nosier, and she smiled all the time.

"Setsuna, you…"

Io knew that her muttering wouldn't reach her target's ears, but she continued anyway.

"You've grown up a little."

Had it happened naturally, or had she done it out of necessity?

Was it proof of her development as a person, or was it the result of her loss?

Io had no way of knowing.

Twinkle Snow ~Dream~ III

"Well… Merry Christmas, everyone!"
"M-Merry Christmas."
"Merry… Christmas…"

After each of them spoke, in their voices of slightly varying warmth, the dry sound of glasses clinking together resounded through the room, and the routine Christmas party began.

"Wow, that looks incredible… Not too bad, celebrating Christmas with sashimi and tempura and hot pot."
"Christmas pudding and chawanmushi are a little similar, I guess… The ingredients, I mean."
"Chicken, too… The pot is packed."

Supposing that having a variety of Japanese food set out in Japanese-style room in a hot springs inn, raising a toast while all dressed in yukata bearing the logo of the inn, could be considered "routine."

"And just look out the window… It's a real White Christmas."
"Guess so."
"I mean, we did pick this spot on purpose."

'Let's go and see the snow,' 'Let's go as soon as winter break starts,' 'Maybe a hot spring would be nice'… All of these came as *emphatic requests* from a certain someone.

"Oh, yeah, and the open-air bath was amazing! The snow just fell all the way in, since there's no roof…"
"Yeah, and I thought I was gonna freeze to death the second I got out."
"Sure, it was cold, but it felt *great.* You should have joined us, Haruki-kun!"
"I didn't have the energy…"

After putting forth these not-especially-feminine designs, their organizer took action strangely quickly, making a reservation at an inn run by some relatives of hers, prevailing upon her parents in a way that was both appropriate and pushy, and from the application for student discounts to the creation of their itinerary, she moved the whole thing along on her own, until at last they reached the long-awaited day.

"You're weirdly exhausted for someone who didn't help at all."
"You two are pretty perky…"
"We're just differently trained. I've hardly had any time to sleep the past two months."
"I'll take the blame for November, but you brought it on yourself in December…"

In the past few days, Setsuna was really the only one who had taken any action concerning this plan.

The other two left just about everything up to her, apart from replying, 'Hot springs…?'

"Wow, thinking back on it, this year was *rough!* C'mon, let's start drinking!"
"You're getting into year-end-party mode, Setsuna."
"This is obviously a year-end party. Calling this a Christmas party would tick off the Westerners."

Because the two of them knew Kazusa's own gradual response wouldn't amount to much.

Because they were confident in what Setsuna was doing, to a certain extent.

"Christmas party, year-end party, I don't really care. The point is, I get to be with the people I want to be with."

And because the two of them… no, the *three* of them knew.

"Yes, yes, very well, Princess Setsuna. As you wish."
"…Yeah, okay. Merry Christmas."

They knew that the two of them couldn't possibly stop Setsuna from feeling *that way.*

"Um, well, everyone, thank you very much for taking time out of your busy schedules to gather here…"

And, it was common knowledge that pleasant times like these would slip by in an instant…

But the three of them weren't jaded enough, or willing enough to accept the inevitable, to allow these particular pleasant times to end in an instant.

"Today, um… We have so much to celebrate that I may not be able to summarize it neatly, but we do have plenty of time, after all!"

The feast laid out on the table had been depleted, and the host had removed the serving trays, which meant their real party was beginning.

Laid out on the table now were a certain staple carbonated Christmas beverage pulled out of Kazusa's bag, and a veritable mountain of sweets pulled out of Setsuna's bag, and their second round of toasts began.

"Hmm… Well, to start, let me say again: Merry Christmas!"

With Setsuna's clear, bell-like voice, their three glasses clinked together like yet another bell, blessing their Christmas Eve.

"And, to our graduation. The three of us."
"Yeah, I guess it was basically a Christmas Eve miracle for one of us…"
"Leave. Leave right now and walk back to Tokyo."

Once again, their three glasses clinked together, though there were some impurities mixed into their voices this time.

Nevertheless, as the wording of Setsuna's toast indicated, after the exam period and the following week of supplementary exams, it had been confirmed before Winter Break began that all three of them would graduate.

Kazusa herself had made it through to the final moment of the final day, humming nonchalantly; meanwhile, her wire-puller, Haruki, felt as though his life had been shortened by about three years, and his haggardness told on exactly how outrageous a battle it had been.

"To making it here alive today, just barely…"
"Yeah, I'm never getting in your car again."
"Wow, are you actually planning on walking back to Tokyo? Now I'm impressed."

Starting with her first experience driving on the freeway, then to mountain roads, snowy roads, getting lost, getting into an accident…

By the time a vehicle from the inn had pulled the snow-bound car to its destination, the composition—the driver, Kazusa, humming nonchalantly to herself, and her navigator, Haruki, in a haggard state—was precisely as it had been during the exam period.

"To Kazusa's… making peace with her mother."
"H-Hey…"
"I wish I could have seen that historic moment of reconciliation."
"Oh, yeah, I bet Kazusa was just sobbing."
"…*Hey.*"

The call from Kazusa's mother, Youko Touma, from whom she hadn't heard in half a year, came right after the school festival show.

In other words, right after Kazusa had gotten a boyfriend…

Youko, famous worldwide for being a pianist of many affairs, couldn't possibly let such an appetizing topic slip by, and after a lot of embarrassment, presumption, concealment, and phone-scrambling, a truly epic mother-daughter quarrel unfolded.

…Yes, at the age of eighteen, Kazusa finally had her first real, out-and-out fight with her mother.

When Kazusa told the two of them about this, the look of unreserved happiness on her face brought the greatest happiness to Haruki and Setsuna, and they delighted in it with no reservation.

"And, to the revival of Kazusa Touma, genius pianist."
"All I did was enter a contest for the first time in a while… It's not that big."
"You yourself were bragging about how you were guaranteed to win…"
"And, and, as a prayer for Kazusa to enter music school…"
"The fact that I made to the final selection means I'll be able to get an endorsement. Walk in the park."
"See, like that."

And their good fortune—Kazusa's, and everyone's—didn't stop there.

Youko, who had once given up on her daughter's talent, seemed to have been deeply impressed by Kazusa's simple school festival performance, and had declared that she would support this comeback.

If Kazusa got good results in the New Year's piano competition, Youko would use her influence to see to it Kazusa got her endorsement and made it into music school, offer her unstinting support for her performance life after that… Whether or not she revealed the cheat tactics that turned a NEET who could only play piano into Japan's most promising young classical pianist…

"B-But not just for me… To you two, for making it into Houjou University."
"Thank you, Kazusa…"

Kazusa, who was beet-red even though she wasn't drinking sake, snatched the toasting initiative from Setsuna, and bumped her glass against the others…

"Well, I mean, we just went the route that was obvious for us…"
"Correction: to *Setsuna's* acceptance into Houjou University."

…Or acted as though she were, while avoiding Haruki's glass splendidly.

"Umm, last of all… I'm gonna be a little bit selfish here…"

Now, as though this truly were to be the last toast, Setsuna took back the initiative, and held her glass higher than she had for any of the previous toasts.

"Our reunion on this day, of the Houjou High School Light Music Club, um…"

But, compared with the vigor with which she lifted her glass, her words themselves were slowly losing steam.

"Um, like… Next year, and the year after that…"
"…"
"…"
"We could do this again, watch the snow, enjoy the baths, talk all night…"

Her bell-like voice toned down to something faint and flimsy, but that wasn't all—her confidence, and her gaze, fell to the table.

"I know what I'm saying right now is lame. I know it might be selfish."
"I know I'm probably just intruding on the two of you…"
"Setsuna…"

Haruki could recall having seen the expression now on Setsuna's face, twice before.

"But, but, I… I like having it be the three of us."
"I don't want to lose you, Kazusa, or Haruki-kun."

The first time was on the first day of the school festival—the day before their show.

The faint smile of a hostess—on the verge of tears, but also just a bit happy—when he went to collect her from the classroom, after she'd struggled to make her voice come out during rehearsal and lost her confidence.

"Oh, god, what am I even saying? …I'm so lame."

And the second time…

The second time was after the festival, in Music Room #2, at dusk.

When she gently woke the dozing Haruki, and told him something important…

"But, but… I still… I…!"
"Oh my god, just *stop* already!"
"Ow?!"

"K-Kazusa?"

To Setsuna, it was a sudden attack from Kazusa's clenched fist.

"Why the hell are you waffling like this?! You were the one who told me off for exactly that kind of attitude! You were the one who gave me that push!"

But, for Kazusa, it was the final snap after holding herself back through so much.

"Listen, Setsuna, I promise… We'll always be together, the three of us."
"Ah… Ah…!"

The final snap of a coward, who couldn't endure seeing her benefactor worrying and crying.

"These club reunions of ours will go on next year, and the year after that… forever. Right, Haruki?"
"I mean… What reason would I have not to be there?"

“Kazusa… Haruki-kun…!”
“Ugh, this is so embarrassing! Let’s just drink and forget about it already!”

But, similarly unable to stand her own display in encouraging Setsuna, Kazusa now hid her reddening face behind the sleeve of her yukata as she raised her glass.

“Now, this is the last one for real, Setsuna… so finish it up properly.”
“Y-Yes… Okay!”

And, with this heartening support from her dearest friend, tears finally streaming out from her red, swollen eyes, Setsuna wrung out her words in a voice like a cracked bell.

“Well… Well, then, to the three of us.”
“Cheers…”

“Hey.”
“Hm?”

It was four in the morning, and the lamps had been put out. The only thing illuminating the room was the bright whiteness of the snow outside the window.

“Thanks.”
“For what?”

They had goofed around after dinner, goofed around over mixed bathing in the open-air baths, even goofed around over who would sleep where.

“The toast.”
“Oh… That was just because my arm was tired from holding up the glass.”
“That’s not all I meant.”
“Then, what?”

Just when it seemed everyone had fallen asleep, Setsuna began to whisper—quiet enough that Haruki couldn’t hear it in the next room, but loud enough for Kazusa, who had the futon next to hers.

“Thank you… for finally saying, ‘the three of us.’”
“I mean, it was obvious. I don’t… know how to feel, being thanked for something like that.”

Once she felt certain that Kazusa was awake… and Haruki was asleep, of course.

“I’m glad we’re friends, Kazusa.”
“Setsuna…”

Because she wanted to be absolutely sure Kazusa heard this.

“I’m so glad that we’re best friends…!”

And because she didn’t want Haruki to hear, if at all possible.

"Hee, heehee… ah, ahaha…!"
"I swear to god…"

Setsuna was still dragging along her self from a few hours before.

A reckless performance, trying to show the single emotion that was happiness, and also the full scope of human emotions.

Her expressions, voice, words, and tears scattered and jumbled together, her feelings a chaos with no shape, sound, or color, piercing all the more directly *because* they were so chaotic, and Kazusa turned her back toward Setsuna in her futon without really thinking about it.

Because Kazusa, who until a few months ago had cut herself off from any show of emotion from anyone at all, had absolutely no idea what to do with Setsuna's simultaneously confused and direct emotions.

"Hey, Setsuna."
"Hmm?"
"Why me?"
"Huh?"

Although she acted as though she were trying to avoid Setsuna, Kazusa couldn't help but ask.

"Why am *I* your best friend, instead of Mizusawa or someone else?"

Because "not knowing what to do with" something wasn't the same as hating it.

"Why did you want to get close to someone like me? I'm unsociable, I'm rude, my personality is terrible, I hate everyone… I'm just an awful person."
"Kazusa…"
"On top of that, I'm stupid, my piano playing is the only thing I have going for me, I haven't even played the piano in ages, and if I keep going like this I'm just gonna end up a shut-in. I'm a drop-out, that's all I am."
"…"
"And yet, you say I'm… I'm your…"
"Good question…"

Finally, whether because she was getting impatient with this excessive self-torture, or because she didn't want to make Kazusa say anything more, Setsuna returned to a calm tone of voice…

"Maybe… because you're cute."
"Ngah?!"

And nestled her body right up against Kazusa's back.

…She had slipped into Kazusa's futon, catching her unawares.

"Mmmph… Kazusaaa…"
"H-Hey, whoa, Setsuna… have you been sneaking more booze?"
"Why would I ever do that?"
"Well, you're pretty obviously drunk!"

A soft, warm sensation spread across Kazusa's back.

A faint, beguiling scent, a mix of soap, hot spring water, and skin, tickled her nose.

"Heehee. You don't have to freak out that much… I just wanted to hold you tight, and maybe kiss you."
"Of course I'm freaking out!"

Warm breath and sweet words blew against her ear.

The hands wrapping around her reached her chest and stomach and began caressing her, violating the soft, fair skin that equaled Setsuna's own.

"Ahh… I was just kidding around, but you're so soft, and you smell so nice, I'm getting a little excited… Well, since it's you, Kazusa, I could…"
"It's not exciting for *me!"*
"Are you sure about being so loud…? Haruki-kun might wake up…"
"…S-Stop…"
"…That really is pretty cute, when you talk quietly like that."
"…Huh?"

Suddenly, she found that the arms wrapped around her had retracted, and the two sensations pressed against her back had also been lost.

"Now we're even, Kazusa."
"F-For what…?"
"Y'know. 'Why the hell are you waffling like this?!'"
"Oh…"

Instead, a fist thumped lightly against the back of her head.

"I promise, Kazusa… We'll always be best friends."
"S-Setsuna… You…"
"Heehee. Did I surprise you?"
"I'm not sure you understand how much your own actions weaken other people."

Now Kazusa's voice became shrill, shaking with emotion, whether because she was trying to hide her own embarrassment, or because she was genuinely crying.

"Really? I don't know about that…"
"Yes, it's true! I'm a girl, and you still had my heart absolutely racing just now!"
"Heehee, really? I'm glad to know I made you feel that way…"
"That's what I mean… Any guy or girl would fall for you, with you pressing in that close."
"Hmm… I think that's a bit of an exaggeration…"

Was it because her emotions shaken excessively?

Or was it because Setsuna showed her own emotions in such extremes?

"I was totally lost for how to deal with you at first. I was scared. I had my guard up."
"Huh… Why?"
"…"

Kazusa carelessly put into words these dark feelings that she had meant to take to the grave.

"Hey… Why?"
"Because… Now, you'd better swear not to tell him this."
"…All right."
"I thought I might… lose."
"…Ah."
"I didn't think… I would be any match for you."

"Touma-san, right?"

"Setsuna… Ogiso."

Ever since Setsuna first addressed her by name…

Ever since she first looked into Setsuna's eyes…

"I'm the worst kind of person."
"…"

Kazusa realized that Setsuna's feelings were directed the same way as her own.

"Hey, Setsuna… You really, seriously want someone like me as your…"
"That's one of the really cute things about you, actually."
"Huh?"

But none of that was Kazusa's case alone.

"The part where you try so hard to hide something that's been obvious since the start."

Ever since she first spoke to Kazusa…

Ever since Kazusa first stared at her with wavering eyes…

"It's such a maidenly way of thinking… It doesn't match your face or attitude or behavior at all. Y'know?"

Setsuna realized that Kazusa's feelings were stronger, and more intense, than her own.

"S-Setsuna…?"
"Heehee… heeheehee… ahahaha!"
"D-Don't laugh! Hey…"
"But, but… Kazusa, you are so… you're just…!"
"I can't believe you're laughing…"
"Huh? Why?"

Yes, the two of them knew from the start…

That they were both interested in the same boy.

"How can you still laugh? How can you laugh this whole thing off?"
"What do you…"
"I *betrayed* you."

But, before the festival, they confirmed it.

"The boy I like the most is Haruki Kitahara-kun, from class 3-E… Will that do?"

"The guy I like… most… There isn't one."

At that point, Kazusa dropped out of the game.

She didn't respond to Setsuna's declaration of war.

"Am I… really your best friend? Can I be your best friend…?"

And yet, the one by Haruki's side now…

The one who won, without even fighting…

"Why… did you do that?"
"Um… Atonement, for sneaking a peek?"
"Yeah, right…"

After the festival… Two hours after the school festival concert.

In the twilit music room #2, which had served as their changing room, the two backing band members who had put everything into lifting up their singing idol confirmed their feelings for one another.

…But, in fact, this awkward love story had another story behind it.

"I'm sorry, Kazusa. I must have embarrassed you then."
"Why the hell did you let me take him…? I know you liked him too."

In fact, only one person communicated her feelings in the twilit music room #2, which had served as their changing room.

The shy girl who gave a waking kiss to the boy who slept as if under a spell, but then panicked and ran away.

"Well… Because I believe that our current relationship is what's best for us."
"Setsuna…"

And so, there was one more player, who set it all on a trajectory for a tale that, as things were, had no reason to be completed.

A nosy girl, who handed the newly-awakened boy a glass slipper, and told him to find the girl it fit.

"Because I believe the relationship that allows the people I love the best to remain the ones I love the best, is the best."
"…You keep saying that. 'The best.'"
"Haruki-kun would probably get annoyed with me for being so repetitive."

And now, these two actresses, with roles as different as princess and guard, were in the same futon, gazing at each other…

"Why would the two of us both be set on a guy like him…?"
"Heehee, you're right… Two impressive young women like us!"
"And a petty official type like him…"
"Oh, no, Haruki-kun's going to move up in life. He'll be a full-on bureaucrat!"
"…Neither of those is especially impressive for a guy."
"Heehee, true."
"Well, whatever suits him suits him, I guess."

Forgetting their positions, laughing together.

"Hey, Kazusa…"
"Hm?"
"Do you mind if I sleep here, like this?"
"Oh, yeah… I guess it would be warmer this way."
"Should I go and get Haruki-kun, too, then?"
"…Don't get carried away, Setsuna."
"Are you telling me not to mess around? Or not to make a move on your man?"
"…Good night!"

It was a dream.

This was the dream that Setsuna had always wished for.

A dream from which she wished deeply, ardently, never to wake up.

She and her best friend, with whom she could share everything, both worried over this middle school sort of romance.

As companions who shared a dream, they swore eternal friendship.

And their happiness was sure to increase, more and more, from now on…

"Good night."

But, really, Setsuna knew.

She knew there was no such thing as a dream that could last forever.

She knew that, as happy as the dream was, she would have to wake up sooner or later.

"We're here."
"Yeah."

Pleasant times slipped by in an instant.

…Granted, a trip with only a one-night stay was doomed to conclude within forty-eight hours as it was.

Kazusa's high-end imported car, bearing a few more scrapes and dents than it had before the trip, stopped right at the base of the apartment building where Haruki lived.

"Man, I'm worn out."
"Yeah."
"I just wanna get home, take a shower, and zonk out."
"Maybe I'll shower, too… Though a nice big bath would be nice."
"What are you thinking about, you perv?"
"…It's your fault for putting the thought in my head."

They had parted ways with Setsuna at her house, ten minutes earlier.

She kept waving until they could no longer see her from the car.

As though she were basking in the afterglow of this trip that she had enjoyed to such a foolish extent.

…Or, as though she were resisting the inevitable return from her dream—the three of them—to reality, alone.

"Well, see you later."
"Yeah…"

And now, their curt parting words exchanged, Haruki got out of the car.

"…"
"…"

Took his travel bag out of the trunk, slowly slung it over his shoulder.

"…"
"…"

And Kazusa, after turning toward the passenger seat and giving a small wave, turned back, started the car, and set off.

"…"
"…"

The sound of the engine gradually grew distant, bringing down the curtain on their Christmas party.

"…Go already."
"I'm going, I'm going."

At least, that's how it was *supposed* to happen…

"…"
"…"

But Haruki showed no sign of getting out of the car, so their parting was a failure from the start.

"Hey…"
"I know…"

Actually, that wasn't even the first course.

"You really don't have to worry about me."
"It's not about 'have to'…"
"I'm not holding that tightly. You can just shake me off."
"What, and you don't have the choice of letting go yourself?"
"Are you kidding? Why would I…"
"Listen…"

Kazusa stopped the car at this spot a scant minute before this.

She pulled over to the side of the road, stepped on the footbrake, disengaged the clutch, shifted the gear into neutral, pulled the hand brake, removed her feet from the clutch and footbrake, and…

As soon as her right hand let go of the handbrake, she hurriedly wrapped it around Haruki's left hand.

"I'm… serious."
"Kazusa…"

She'd said he could shake her off, but Haruki's hand had remained in the pianist's powerful grip the whole time.

Kazusa's hand, soft, stiff, hot, sweaty, shaking slightly, continued to act in defiance of its owner's words.

"Well, then… If you don't want to let go…"
"…Huh?"
"Come here."

Haruki knew.

"If you aren't going to let go… Come here."

When Kazusa's words and actions diverged, he knew which of them represented her true feelings.

Over half a year out of touch, and one month of connection, he had come to understand.

"…What, you don't have any self will? You won't move yourself?"
"If I did, I would shake you off. I would go home voluntarily."
"And you're cold, for that matter."
"I'm not cold. I'm just…"
"Just…?"
"I'm just a hopeless case. I want to see you acting spoiled with me, no matter how much mean I have to be for it."
"Hmph…"

And Haruki's bet, as low as the odds were, hit the target almost too easily.

"Kazusa…"
"Shut up."

Kazusa freed herself from the driver's seat, and leaned over onto Haruki in the passenger seat.

She buried her face in his chest, shook it back and forth, as if to dig up his bare skin from behind his sweater, and inhaled deeply.

Like a dog who had finally been given her reward after being kept waiting for two weeks, single-mindedly taking in her master's scent, and marking him with her own scent at the same time.

"Kazusa… You smell good."

And so, faced with this earnest, slightly animalistic behavior, Haruki took a completely human action—or, perhaps, showed a generosity befitting an owner—and embraced her.

"…You're gross, Haruki."
"Well, I won't deny that."

…Generous enough that he could accept having his hand bitten, in an exaggerated attempt to hide embarrassment.

"Maybe I am gross when it comes to you. Maybe I'm a total obsessive creep."
"The fact that you're even saying that is… gross."
"Like I said, I won't deny it."
"You think there's a single girl who would be happy hearing you say something that forced?"
"No, I didn't really mean…"
"Any girl… other than me?"

And, of course, Kazusa followed through with her habit, licking his wound after she'd bitten him, nuzzling up to him.

"I'm the only one like that… No one else."
"Kazusa…"

Her hands, which had been resting on Haruki's shoulders, now wrapped around his neck, and she pressed her hair against his face, passing along more of her scent.

"I'm the only one who can understand how gross you are, how forced, how pathetic… even reluctantly."
"Yeah…"
"So, I'm the only one you get to make a move on."
"Yeah…"

And Haruki accepted this deeper contact from her, filling his lungs with the fragrance of her hair.

The soapy smell from after they had gotten out of the bath last night had vanished, but that meant Kazusa's own faint smell stimulated his brain all the more directly, wrapping him in a pleasant, melting feeling.

Because he had always adored this smell, ever since the spring when he first met her.

"Ugh, why do you only ever spit out creepy lines?"
"I mean, you also…"
"We're both so gross. It gives me the shivers."
"Honestly…"

He paid no attention to any of her complaints, rubbing his cheek against hers.

"I'm getting chills."
"Seriously?"
"Yes, seriously… I'm cold…!"
"God, you're so needy…"

As they exchanged these irrational criticisms, their foreheads bumped together.

"I'm not needy!"
"Right, right. Well, I'm going home."
"Hey! You—mmph?!"

As a finishing touch, Haruki stole Kazusa's lips before she could get steamed up any further—by force, even though there was no reason to believe she would resist.

"Mm, mm…"

And Kazusa shut her eyes, supremely happy, and yielded herself to Haruki completely.

Closing her eyes, blocking her ears, letting Haruki cover her mouth…

Kazusa emptied her mind, thought of nothing, and focused her every nerve on this intimacy with her boyfriend.

Praying that she wouldn't remember the conversation with *her,* from the night before…

She chased that bitterness to the back of her throat, and kept on with this moment of sweetness, tasting only with the tip of her tongue…

"Mm, mm…"
"Mph… Ah, hahh…"

Finally, their lips separated.

"Not cold any more, are you?"
"No… I'm still cold."
"…Kazusa?"

It was clear enough that their bodies in full contact, and the sighs against their lips and cheeks, were practically burning up.

"I'm cold, Haruki…"
"Why are you…"
"I don't know…"

And yet, Kazusa stubbornly refused to move away.

"I'm so happy. Everything is going so perfectly for me…"

Her eyes were moist now, like her lips.

"My heart should be warm…"

Her body was trembling now, like her lips.

"You're not cold, Haruki? Not cold at all?"
"I'm… hot, actually."

Haruki's uncertainty made its way to Kazusa.

The more flustered Kazusa became, the less able she was to bridge the gap between their emotions.

She realized that she was the only one who wanted a "conclusion," right here and now.

"So, you're… hot."

Why do I want a guy like him?

Why is a guy like him the one that I don't want anyone else to have?

A guy like him… No one, other than me, would want a guy like him…

Kazusa's sense of reason threw question after question at her in her head.

Cooling down the burning chill Kazusa held in her heart.

"Oh, no, Haruki-kun's going to move up in life. He'll be a full-on bureaucrat!"

"…"

And yet, no matter how she might struggle to remove this fluster…

Why someone like her?

Why someone like her, who anyone could fall for…?

Those honest expressions of affection, with no malice behind them…

That clear voice, earnest and yet impish…

They threw her mind hopelessly into confusion.

"Ah…"

And so, ultimately, she hung onto Haruki with even greater force than before.

"I'm cold… The complete opposite."

But, the longer their bodies remained on top of each other, the more Haruki felt it.

Kazusa's childish fussing, too clumsy to even be called a lie.

What it was that Kazusa wanted.

"So, then, um…"
"Kazusa…"

Up to this point, just the dependency had been enough.

Saying "two members of a trio" was enough.

But this was the divide.

"We'll always be together, the three of us."

In order to sacrifice herself for that oath she swore a mere day ago, she would have to turn back here…

"But, but, I… I like having it be the three of us."

"Warm me up with your heat, will you…?"

But someone else's words, with the same meaning, awakened Kazusa's instincts.

Was it whispering to her, to follow her own desires?

Was it a warning, a sense of impending crisis?

Or was it both…?

"In exchange, I'll cool you down… Haruki."
"Kazusa…"

I'm the worst, aren't I.

And so, all too easily…

Kazusa scrapped the oath she swore with Setsuna.

Even though they had touched each other, played around with each other, a mere day prior.

But… I'm all right with being the worst.

…No, because of it.

Because she had felt Setsuna's appeal as a girl with her whole body, she had no choice but to betray her.

Because, the more she liked Setsuna…

The more she felt that appeal…

The more she felt she wanted to be together…

The more terrified she was of the trio remaining a trio.

"Just so you know, I'm not as stubborn as you think I am."
"The fact that you have to deny it in advance makes you stubborn…"

And, just as Kazusa hoped…

Haruki indulged every bit of his *girlfriend's* selfishness.

While trying with all his might to think of a way that the trio could remain a trio, no doubt.

He's mine.

All mine. He isn't going anywhere…

"I'm not going to stop, even if you say it hurts."
"You don't even have to say it…"

Which meant that she could leave the rest to Haruki.

All she had to do was cling to Haruki, wherever he might go…

This is okay, right, Setsuna?

You gave us your blessing, right?

So, there shouldn't be any problem, right…?

"That hurts, Haruki…"

Twinkle Snow ~Dream~ IV

"Well, this is great! Now the four of us can be together again."
"We've finally made it to college, and yet our lineup isn't changing at all…"

It was January.

The first three days of the new year had rushed by, and what had rushed to meet them was their third school, term, but for people who were already guaranteed to graduate and enter the university, these days were spent in full-on cruise mode.

"I was pretty nervous, you know! Takeya-kun didn't pick his course until the last minute…"
"Oh, yeah, that was just… a pause."
"A pause?"

And so, Setsuna and Haruki, two of those who were "already guaranteed to graduate and enter the university," set off on their way home while the afternoon sun was still high in the sky, and turned their thoughts to the new life that awaited them in April.

"Well, he had a lot going on… Will you promise not to tell anyone this?"
"S-Sure…?"
"He was planning from the beginning to go to the same university as Io."
"What…"
"So he pretended to be mulling it over until the very last minute."
"I-I see."
"Of course, whether Io knew or didn't know about that, she would probably just say, 'So, what?'…"
"…"
"Those two are really just… What's up, Setsuna?"
"Huh? Oh, uh… nothing, really. Why?"

"Oh, I just feel like normally you'd be more excited about this… Y'know, 'Hey, I wonder whether those two will really be able to pull it together this time? I hope so!' or something."
"Come on, I… I wouldn't say a nosy thing like that!"
"Really…? Well, if you say so."
"…"
"…Yeah, there's something up with you today, Setsuna."

Yet again… it was January.

In the time the three of them spent together in the first three days, they thought back on memories of the past three years, freaking out and relaxing in turn in the face of the little time that remained until graduation.

Because that was what all three of them, every single one, wanted… supposedly.

"See you tomorrow, then."
"Oh, um, by the way…"
"Hm?"

They exited the school gate, passed through the shopping district at Suetsugu Station, passed by the park, entered the residential area.

When they reached Setsuna's house, via the same roads they always took, the area was already wrapped in dusk.

"You don't have to walk me home any more."
"Why not?"
"Well, I'm not coming home as late as I was during the school festival."
"Is there some school regulation that says I can't go with you if your way home is safe?"
"It's just a detour for you, Haruki-kun."
"Don't underestimate the legs of a member of the go-home club. I could walk all the way to Onjuku."
"Also… Kazusa isn't here."
"…How many more times are you going to harp on this, Setsuna?"

Ever since the year started, a certain other person who had announced her candidacy for music school had been applying herself zealously to "studying for exams," to the point that she scarcely showed up at school at all.

"As many as I have to. Kazusa is working so hard on her own, and…"
"I know. I talk to her on the phone every day."
"I do, too…"

With only half a month left before the competition, she was deep in the midst of a sixteen-hours-a-day training regimen, and even the heaps of verbal abuse for Haruki coming through the phone receiver seemed a bit more tired than usual.

"Look, the three of us are all together, right? There's nothing to worry about."
"But…"
"Seriously, you don't seem like yourself today…"
"Well…"

Something is definitely wrong.

I mean, we aren't dating.

This relationship can't exist without all three of us… without Kazusa.

"Do you not like going home with me, or something?"
"N-No, it's not that—"
"Or is it annoying, having me insist on helping like this?"
"If you didn't, you wouldn't be you, Haruki-kun!"
"…Should I take that as a compliment?"
"Ah, sorry…"

Though she apologized as a matter of form, Setsuna didn't see her words as a gaffe in the least.

Nor did it occur to her that her own awareness of the fact might come out as a show of contempt for him…

"Anyway, Setsuna!"
"Y-Yes?"
"I'm gonna come and get you tomorrow, too! So you'd better wait for me."
"Huh? What?"

Taking little notice of Setsuna's absorption in her own thoughts, Haruki brought things forcibly to a conclusion.

"You'll be in the library again, right? As soon as I've finished everything up, I'll come and get you."

As she was always swallowed up by this pace at the end, and had kept losing and losing every argument up until today, Setsuna knew perfectly well that this was a decisive moment…

"Ah, ahaha… Well, I guess I'll see you tomorrow, then."

But, just like always, she folded at the last minute.

"That's right. See you tomorrow."
"Yeah… Bye."

Unable to put up a front and reject him, she instead spoke what she truly felt.

"I will never, ever leave you, Ogiso!"

As Haruki left, Setsuna felt as though she could see a transparent cross on his back, the one she had made him bear back then.

But, now, there was a part of her that wanted to cling to that binding spell once again.

"Five… thirty-two."

Twenty-two minutes after exiting the high school gate.

Normally this route would take fifteen minutes for someone going alone, but today, she walked slowly, tapping out the numbers.

Really, there was no need to stay at school this late, but because he always stayed late with miscellaneous affairs, she would lie and say she had things to look up, and kill time in the library. Thus had she gained these twenty-two minutes.

"Seven minutes… over."

She knew that she was completely contradicting her words from before…

Even so, Setsuna allowed herself to reflect upon the fact that she had been able to spend just slightly longer a time than usual with him.

"So… all four of you are going into politics and economics."
"Yep! Like Haruki-kun said, nothing's going to change from how it was in high school."

Night time.

Now that she'd eaten dinner, hung around in the living room with her family for a bit, taken a bath, and gone back to her room, it was precisely ten o'clock.

The next thirty minutes were the only time Setsuna could talk with Kazusa.

That was the rule that the three of them had decided on together, for the sake of Kazusa's success in the competition.

"Man, you guys are lucky you don't have to do any more test studying. I'm just now heading into my last big stretch."
"Maybe you should have spent the last three years working at it, then? Every day, like Haruki-kun, instead of cramming it all in at the last minute…"
"…Give me a damn break. You think someone like me could live a life like that?"

Even Setsuna, who could easily talk for three or four hours at a stretch, adhered rigidly to this rule.

Because she didn't want to hinder Kazusa's practicing, of course… but also because she didn't want to steal any time from the two lovebirds, whose conversation time began at 10:30.

"Ahaha! But, you know, you're going to have to go along with 'a life like that' from now on."
"Not so sure about that."
"Oh? Are you sure you should be talking like that?"
"Well, I mean, you and he are gonna be spending more time together now, right?"
"What…"
"No, I mean…"
"Kazusa…"

Kazusa's inadvertent grumble at that moment, on top of being irrational, was nothing more than an unwarranted bit of vitriol, with hardly any connection to the conversation up to that point.

"Um… You, and the club chair, and Mizusawa, right? Since you're all gonna be in the same department, at the same university."
"R-Right…"

Setsuna could have gotten mad. Or, she could have laughed it off.

"That thing about the lineup not changing from high school. I wasn't part of that, so…"

Instead, she found herself at a loss for words in the face of what should have been a meaningless comment, and simply forced the conversation to continue.

"Th-Then, you should go somewhere close by, Kazusa. Hey, the Tomioka School of Music is only one bus ride away. And it's a sister school to Houjou…"
"I don't wanna go there… It'd be full of people from our music department."
"…Ah…"

A barren conversation, to which neither of them could see a conclusion.

"Well, have fun. I'll be spending the next four years totally sunk in the piano. It'll be a pretty grey college life."
"Kazusaaa, you don't have to be so nervous. We'll be able to see each other on weekends and summer break, and you know Haruki-kun will call you every day."
"You don't have to try to make me feel better. I brought it on myself anyway."
"Are you anxious? About not getting to be with him?"
"Not really…"

Even though Kazusa put up a front, antsiness and jealousy were absolutely oozing out of her voice, and it was blatantly obvious that there was nothing "not really" about it.

"Oh, I know!"
"What."
"You're worried that he'll find some new, nasty girlfriend!"
"Wh-What the hell?!"
"Well, you don't have to worry. Leave it all to me!"

And so, Setsuna, in a brighter, bouncier voice than was necessary, forcibly attempted to amend the flow of conversation…

"What are you even talking about, Setsuna? I never said anything that pathetic."
"Listen, I'll be in his same department. I'll keep a watchful eye on him at all times. And, if I sense anything suspicious, I'll tell you right away."
"I don't want you to do that! I don't think there's any need with someone like him, anyway."

"Oh, I know… I could act like his girlfriend to ward anyone else off…"
"Jesus! No, don't! Stop!"
"?!"

And, finally… she awakened it.

The worst fear, sleeping deep within Kazusa's heart.

"Oh… N-No… I didn't really mean that…"

In Kazusa's shout at that moment, there was no shred of playfulness or calm.

It was excruciatingly clear to Setsuna.

"I-I'm so sorry… That was a terrible thing to say, even as a joke…"
"I told you, it's not like that! That's not the problem!"
"…"

She knew who had stolen that calm, too, and it bored into her like a drill.

"Then, I guess it's about time for me to…"
"Yeah…"

The clock in her room read 10:20… Their parting time had come ten minutes earlier than usual.

In the end, their conversation never made a comeback.

Setsuna's freewheeling chitchat, changing topics at the drop of a hat, and Kazusa's badmouthing that was bursting with affection, her words and tone perpetually divergent from each other, both concealed shadows.

"…Good night."
"…Ah, wait, Kazusa!"
"Hm?"
"I can call you again tomorrow, right?"
"…"
"Kazusa…"
"Please do… at the same time, okay?"
"I will!"

But, at the very last minute, with a sigh of relief, she was able to make a promise for the next time: a single saving grace.

"…Whew."

After she hung up, Setsuna looked up at the white ceiling, as though in a daze.

"Ah…"

However, this was a mistake.

Because, when she looked up, she had no way of avoiding it.

"Ah… Ah…"

The truth steadily shone through by the white ceiling, the shining fluorescent light.

The truth that she could no longer keep locked away by her own effort.

"…"

Tears, everything.

It was such a short time ago.

We swore so firmly to each other.

I thought we would go on this way forever…

"…Ah… ahhh…"

Setsuna's one selfish wish.

To remain as a trio.

That the two of them would try to preserve the trio…

"Is it… not going to work out, after all?"

Before she knew it, that wish itself had eaten the three of them to a point beyond repair.

Twinkle Snow ~Dream~ V

Date 2/3 12:26

From Setsuna Ogiso

Sub Re: Where are you?

Sorry, I'm at home.

I think I caught a cold…

Date 2/3 12:30

From Haruki-kun

Sub Are you okay?

How high is your temperature? Have you taken any medicine? Did you go to the doctor? Who all is at home with you?

I can come over right now.

>*Sorry, I'm at home.*

>*I think I caught a cold…*

Date 2/3 12:35

From Setsuna Ogiso

Sub I'm fine!

I only have a little bit of a fever. But Mom is here, so it's okay.

Just make sure you cheer on Kazusa enough for both of us!

Date 2/3 12:38

From Haruki-kun

Sub Re: I'm fine!

All right. Take care of yourself.

As for "cheering on," though, all I'll be able to do is listen quietly.

Date 2/3 12:40

From Setsuna Ogiso

Sub Re: I’m fine!

What time does Kazusa perform?

Date: 2/3 12:44

From Haruki-kun

Sub: Let me think…

She’s the 19th one, so near the end.

Probably around 4, I would guess?

>*What time does Kazusa perform?*

Date 2/3 12:49

From Setsuna Ogiso

Sub Re. Let me think…

Wow… That’s pretty long

Date 2/3 12:55

From Haruki-kun

Sub It’s just about time

I’m heading into the concert hall now, so I’ll talk to you later.

I’ll let you know when the results are out.

Date 2/3 12:57

From Setsuna Ogiso

Sub Re: It’s just about time

Go, Kazusa!

Date 2/3 12:58

From Haruki-kun

Sub Re: It’s just about time

Tell it to her, not me…

Date 2/3 12:59

From Setsuna Ogiso

Sub Re: It’s just about time

I can’t disrupt her concentration!

Date 2/3 16:20

From Haruki-kun

Sub Just finished

Waiting for Kazusa outside the hall.

Date 2/3 16:24

From Setsuna Ogiso

Sub How did it go?

Did she win?! Did she get a prize?

Date 2/3 16:28

From Haruki-kun

Sub Re: How did it go?

They announced through fifth place, but she wasn’t called…

>Did she win?! Did she get a prize?

Date 2/3 16:31

From Setsuna Ogiso

Sub Oh…

But she worked so hard…

Date 2/3 16:36

From Haruki-kun

Sub Re: Oh…

But, this was the final selection stage, which means she already cleared the requirements for her endorsement, so she herself might not actually feel all that down about it.

Date 2/3 16:39

From Setsuna Ogiso

Sub Re: Oh…

Tell Kazusa I said "Well done"

Date 2/3 16:41

From Haruki-kun

Sub Roger

I'm about to meet up with Kazusa, and then we're coming to visit you.

Date 2/3 16:44

From Setsuna Ogiso

Sub Don't!

No, don't! I don't want to pass this cold to Kazusa at such a crucial time for her!

Date 2/3 16:46

From Haruki-kun

Sub Re: Don't!

Oh, good point. Sorry. I'll come on my own, then.

Should get there around 6.

>No, don't! I don't want to pass this cold to Kazusa at such a crucial time for her!

Date 2/3 16:47

From Setsuna Ogiso

Sub Re: Don't!

No, it's okay. I'm about to go to bed

Date 2/3 16:50

From Haruki-kun

Sub Re: Don't!

All right. Take care.

Date 2/3 16:53

From Setsuna Ogiso

Sub Great work

Just be with Kazusa today

Tell her she did an awesome job

Comfort her if she's depressed

Date 2/3 16:58

From Haruki-kun

Sub Re: Great work

Yeah, I will.

You should contact her when you feel better, too.

Good night.

Date 2/3 17:00

From Setsuna Ogiso

Sub Good night

Yeah, I'll send her a mail later tonight or something

Good night

Date 2/3 22:21

From Kazusa

Sub Re: Great work

This is what I'm capable of at this point

The fact that I even made it to the final selection is a miracle

Date 2/3 22:25

From Setsuna

Sub Re: Great work

I wish I could have heard you play, though

I'm really sorry I couldn't make it

Date 2/3 22:35

From Kazusa

Sub Re: Great work

Not your fault, you had a cold

Date 2/3 22:39

From Setsuna

Sub Re: Great work

Anyway, the next thing you have coming up is your endorsement exam, right? Good luck!

Date 2/3 22:46

From Kazusa

Sub Re: Great work

Don't even say the word "exam," please

Now I'm bummed out

Date 2/3 22:49

From Setsuna

Sub Re: Great work

Ahaha, keep it up!

Okay, it’s time for me to go to sleep now

Date 2/3 22:53

From Kazusa

Sub Re: Great work

Sure, good night

Date 2/3 23:23

From Kazusa

Sub Hey

You were actually in the back left corner of the second row weren’t you

Date 2/3 23:35

From Setsuna

Sub Re: Hey

Sorry…

Don’t tell Haruki-kun

Date 2/3 23:31

From Kazusa

Sub Re: Hey

I’m sorry too

I think I know why you did it

It was for me, right? Or at least because of me

Date 2/3 23:35

From Kazusa

Sub Re: Hey

Sorry, I shouldn’t have said anything

I just wanted to say… thanks for coming

Date 2/4 0:11

From Setsuna

Sub I’m sorry

You were amazing, Kazusa

I cried

Now I know it’s possible to think something was amazing without even really understanding it…

Twinkle Snow ~Dream~ VI

"Um, Setsuna…"
"…"
"…Is Ogiso-san here?"
"Why the hell would you start in with last names now? Every single day it's been 'Setsuna, Setsuna.'"
"Well, apparently you're gonna get mad at me whichever I go with…"

When Haruki burst into class A before the end-of-school bell had even finished ringing, he found the sluggish atmosphere of a classroom that had lost all sense of school-life purpose, and a warmth of attitude from his classmate that brought a harsh, bitter winter to mind.

"Ogiso-chan? She went home."
"Huh? Already…?"

But the one person Haruki was looking for was absent.

"Eh, she probably just doesn't wanna see you."
"You think Setsuna's avoiding me…? Why would she?!"
"Why are *you* so sure she wouldn't?!"

Taking no heed of his classmate's criticism and ridicule, Haruki looked over the room one last time from corner to corner, confirmed that Setsuna wasn't there, and sighed lightly.

"Why…? Huh."

It was already Friday, and he hadn't managed to have a single real conversation with Setsuna this week.

Recently… Well, ever since she caught that cold the past weekend, meaning ever since Kazusa's competition, Setsuna had been so distant that it did almost seem forced.

Every morning, in contrast with Haruki, who was always first to arrive, she had shown up just barely in time for the warning bell.

During breaks, including lunch, she never once left the classroom.

And, as had happened today, before Haruki came to pick her up… in fact, before end-of-day homeroom was even over, she slipped out through the entrance and exited the school gate.

Haruki always saw this through the window, across the unoccupied desk right next to him, and today, determined to catch her, he dashed down the hall, in violation of school rules… and now, there was this mess.

"Argh… ?!"

Just as he heaved a second sigh, with no idea what to do or where to go with this…

He suddenly felt someone's fingertip tap lightly against his right shoulder, twice.

"Setsuna…?!"
"…How can anyone be that gullible, in this day and age?"
"If that's what you think, knock it off!"

Haruki spat his complaint at his self-styled best friend, Takeya, with both of the latter's pointer fingers poking his cheeks.

"Huff, huff, huff…"

After sprinting down the hallway at top speed, drawing puzzled looks from surrounding students, rushing down the stairs, and bursting through the entrance, Setsuna finally… well, she came to a halt, drained of all her stamina, and stood with her hands on her knees, heaving great ragged breaths.

"Huff, huff, huff, huff…"

Her heart felt like it was about to leap out of her mouth, and it wasn't just because of the running.

Most likely, it was because of her reason for throwing herself so frantically, right now, into the act of running.

Irritation, fear, anguish… and hope she should never have held, combined with the disappointment of having that hope betrayed.

All these extraordinarily complicated emotions mixed together to shorten Setsuna's breath.

"Huff… huff…"

And yet, as she tried desperately to steady her breathing, Setsuna stretched her back out taut again, as though to wind a screw.

It was still too early to relax…

She couldn't feel any real relief in an open place like this. Not until she'd left through the gates, made her way through her neighborhood, and closed the door to her own house…

"You haven't been getting nearly enough exercise. Why don't you start skiing for fitness this year?"

…And yet.

"Wh-Why?"
"Don't underestimate a former basketball club regular."

"Regular… You were the captain…!"
"Well, whatever. The point is, you can't outrun me, Setsuna. Never mind Haruki."

Setsuna had just rushed out of the classroom, her preparations for returning home not even begun yet…

Io, so perfectly calm and composed that it was impossible to think she'd run the same distance at the same speed, smiled at Setsuna with no shortness of breath.

"It's been a while since I heard you play the guitar. Was the school festival the last time?"
"Yeah, maybe so…"

As the sun dipped down to the west, it came in at a slant through the windows of Music Room #1, illuminating Haruki and Takeya faintly.

The formation of the Light Music Club, the gathering of members, the senior members who hardly practiced at all, the discord that broke out over the admission of the female vocalist, the eventual disintegration…

In this space full of memories for the two boys—some of them unpleasant— Haruki slowly began playing a new song, something not in his repertoire, as if testing something.

"Maybe I'll start practicing again in college…"
"Gonna make your debut at the university festival?"
"Well, I'm not interested in throwing together a band in a rush like that again, so I'd start preparing a little sooner… Would you join, Takeya?"
"Hang on, when did our lousy guitar player get so lofty?"
"…Shut up. Stupid."

The first time Haruki heard this song was on a video site.

Apparently it was the theme song for some video game or late-night drama or anime series, but he didn't know much about it, and he hadn't looked into it, either.

But the lovely, fleeting melody and lyrics had stuck in his head.

"So, what's going on? Why did you bring me here?"
"You did something to make Setsuna-chan hate you."
"…"

He had made it this far without any mistakes, however clumsily he played along; but at these carefully aimed words from Takeya, Haruki's fingers slipped hard out of line.

"She's been completely avoiding you lately… I mean, all the other third-year guys are probably thrilled to see that, but…"
"Setsuna's busy like the rest of us… With graduation and college coming up, and

all…”
“She’s been just fine with me. We actually spent three hours chatting in a café the other day. It wasn’t just us, there was one other person, but.”
“…”

After that, though he attempted to start again from the point where he slipped, the noise interference next to him prevented the melody from coming to his mind, and Haruki was forced to set the guitar aside.

“Though, I guess it’s okay, really.”
“What’s okay about that…?”
“You already have a girlfriend who’s never gonna hate you.”
“…”
“It’s really cute how head-over-heels she is. It’s like she can’t see anyone but you.”
“She… hated me forever, though.”
“Haruki, are you aware of the term ‘tsundere’?”
“She can’t be bipolarized that way. It’s more complicated than that. It’ll seem like she’s been smiling constantly, and then she’ll suddenly blow up… I don’t know how I’m supposed to handle her.”
“…Sounds to me like you know exactly what the word means. Wouldn’t expect anything less.”

At the time that they first met, this girl who was fundamentally ignored, yelled readily, was frequently disgusted, and looked his way very, very rarely, was nothing more than a strange, unknown life form to Haruki.

And now, Kazusa, who yelled readily, was frequently disgusted, and yet looked his way constantly…

The fact of her being a strange girl to him still hadn’t changed.

“Anyway, we’re not talking about Kazusa right—“
“So? What about Setsuna-chan? Would she never have hated you? Would she have understood absolutely everything?”
“…No…”

The girl who, at the time that they first met, was fundamentally sociable, laughed readily, was frequently perky, and pouted very, very rarely…

And Setsuna now, who laughed readily, was frequently perky, and yet tried desperately not to show another expression threatening to seep through by covering it with a teary smile…

“Takeya…”
“What?”
“Girls are hard.”
“I know an easy way to get a girl to hang out with you. Want me to tell you how?”
“…What do you do?”

"When you've decided on someone, just plunge in. Don't show any weird attachment. Don't fan any expectations."
"…What does *that* mean?"
"You don't get it?"
"Not remotely."

Haruki fixed Takeya with a disappointed scowl, as though he had in fact grasped it completely.

"…Hey, is that Haruki?"
"I don't know… Maybe?"

As the sun dipped down to the west, it poured down uniformly across the roof, illuminating Setsuna and Io brightly.

But the wind was cold, and strong, as though it were waiting eagle-eyed for an opportunity to change the color of the sky to grey.

And the timbre that she heard, riding faintly upon that powerful wind, was faltering, and lonely enough to stoke sympathy in Setsuna.

"Sorry to stop you like that when you were in a hurry."
"No worries. I didn't really have anything to…"
"Then why were you sprinting like that?"
"Th-There was a TV show I wanted to catch, but then I decided I didn't really care!"

Io sensed that the sound of the metal fence as Setsuna shook it vigorously showed her emotions more truly than the words that spilled out of her mouth, and averted her eyes.

"…Hey."
"Wh-What?"
"Setsuna… What are you gonna do from here on out?"
"From here on out? Well, I've cleared my exams and attendance days. Oh, I'm not sure about the skiing, though… Well, but if it's somewhere with hot springs and karaoke…"
"I'm not asking about graduation or graduation trips."
"Th-Then, what do you mean…?"

Io finally realized that she had misjudged Setsuna.

She'd thought Setsuna was better at lying than this.

"That whole thing about 'being the three of you, forever'… You gonna keep that up?"
"I'd rather you didn't say 'that whole thing about'… It feels like you're making fun of me."

And she'd thought Setsuna was a little more sensible… a little better at knowing when to quit.

"Well, maybe I am, in a sense. It does seem a little bit like you're playing house."
"What do you know, Io…?"

Setsuna's trembling voice made every effort to shove Io coldly away.

Setsuna's wavering eyes tried earnestly to look down on Io.

She tried to make herself believe, firmly, that she was in the higher position.

"You didn't rehearse with us, stay up all night with us, stand on that stage with us. How could you possibly…"
"If you're going that far, then what's with this half-assed way you're doing things now?!"
"…"
"Without Touma-san around, you don't get anywhere near Haruki. In fact, you're blatantly avoiding him."
"Io…"
"Is this distant relationship the 'endless festival for the three of you' that you were talking about? I don't get it at all!"

Yes, Io was being obstinate in her denial.

But, at that moment, what brought some extra harshness to her manner of speaking wasn't irritation with Setsuna's own stubborn attitude…

It may have been that she was dissatisfied with the treatment of the one other person, other than herself, who had spent a short while striving with them.

"What do you know about us, anyway?"

Haruki's trembling voice made every effort to shove Takeya coldly away…

"…Just to be clear, I'm not saying you aren't my best friend."
"I know, I know."

…But Haruki didn't really have the self-assurance or nerve to go anywhere beyond that.

"There are things about me and you that I don't tell Kazusa or Setsuna. The opposite is true, too…"
"Aha. So, even a group of three, there are secrets that two of them won't tell the other one."
"Like I said, what do you…"
"You stayed over at Touma's place, right? Last Sunday… after the competition."
"…"

His reasoning, his prudence, had supported his past three years, and had held the last half-year in a precarious balance. And yet…

"Did you really think I wouldn't catch the signs? If you didn't wanna get found out, you should've skipped school on Monday."

That day, somewhat suspiciously, Haruki had avoided standing out to the best of his ability, focusing all his attention on his personal appearance.

"When did it start? …No, there's no point in asking that, I guess. Considering you two are already *like that."*

It lined up perfectly with Takeya's own behavior from two and a half years ago, when he came to school from a girl's room for the first time.

"She's… about to be busy with her endorsement exam. We won't be able to see each other for a while."
"Okay, but that circumstance has nothing to do with anyone except you two."
"…"

Takeya's words now were the very words that Haruki himself had thrown at his best friend, over and over.

"It doesn't have anything to do with Setsuna-chan, either. You two have started a new relationship, and that's all."
"Okay, so don't…"
"Don't tell Setsuna? Don't go blabbing stuff because I don't understand anything?"

And so, it very much came home to Haruki…

That Takeya was still treating him as his best friend.

And that Takeya was sincerely, honestly worried for him.

"I'll… tell her myself."

In which case, no matter what it took, he couldn't imitate his best friend's usual response.

He had one last shred of pride…

"Be honest with others." He protected this shred, stubbornly.

"Setsuna, what you're doing is *weak.* It's full of contradictions."
"It… No, it's not."
"What do you expect to do in college, with an attitude like this? You're going to have to see him every day. You'll be spending a lot more time together with him."

At some point, the sun had hidden itself.

The sky had become murky with clouds, the wind grown colder…

"Maybe I'll switch departments…"

And Setsuna's emotions had been changed to the same color and temperature.

"Really? Would that fix everything?"
"I've never been good at Politics and Economics. English Literature might be better for me…"
"That's not what I'm asking… No, you know, that could be it in one sense."
"What does that mean…?"
"Well, Setsuna, you were originally talking about going into English lit… Until Haruki decided to go for Politics and Economics."
"!!!"

But right now, Setsuna couldn't feel the cold from these clouds, this wind, even if she wanted to.

"You twisted up your own ambitions because you wanted to be with this guy so badly, and now you're going to distance yourself from him? Is that what you want?"
"D-Don't tell…"
"Don't tell Haruki? Of course I can't do that… For his sake, not yours."
"S-Sorry… I'm sorry!"

The shame of realizing that the core of her heart, which she had tried to desperately to cover up, had slipped out, took her body's temperature to boiling.

"Come on, just stop… This isn't what Setsuna Ogiso does."
"Io…"
"You regret it. It's agony, being the three of you. That's why you're running away, with no idea what to do."

She was being opened up.

"Because, really, you want to be with him. You like Haruki."

Every little feeling that she had loathed in herself was being unraveled, exposed, one by one.

"You don't want it to be three… You want it to be two."
"That's not it…"
"*What's* not it?"

She had worked so hard to cover them up with clean, white snow…

"I'm not that earnest, or that pure…"
"I want both of them. I really want both…"
"I'm so greedy…"

But here they were before her eyes, dark, dirty, like mud trampled and crushed underfoot.

"Y'know, Haruki… You should really quit calling her 'Setsuna.'"
"What the hell?! *You* call her 'Setsuna-chan'!"
"That's different. The weight of calling her by her first name is completely different for each of us."

Takeya's words now were the very words that Haruki himself had thrown at his best friend, over and over.

And yet—no, maybe exactly because of that…

Those words, straight from the heart, were the words he wanted to hear least in the world right now.

"I'm gonna ask you this one more time, Haruki… Which one of them do you *really* like?"
"What? I… Kazusa, obviously."
"Uh-huh… I figured.'
"But Setsuna is still a—"
"A dear friend, right?"
"…"
"They're both really important to you, but one of them is your girlfriend, and one of them is a friend… That's not a great situation."

"Friend." He didn't want to consolidate the girl known as Setsuna into such a standard, basic word.

From an object for coverage to a friend, from a friend to a companion, and from a companion to… one of three.

A special girl, whose disguise was peeled back every time their bond deepened, who steadily became more appealing every time her disguise was peeled back…

"You think Setsuna-chan won't be hurt if you make a weird little distinction like that? …You think Touma won't be hurt if that's the *only* distinction you make?"

Even though he was disgusted with himself for holding these special feelings for her, he couldn't avoid the girl who had given him those feelings.

"If you're gonna make a distinction, you ought to make it a clearer one."
"But that would hurt Setsuna… Removing her from the group of three would hurt her more."
"If she's going to get hurt either way… which do you think will hurt the *least?"*
"I…"
"Make it a clear distinction, or keep things in limbo as the three of you… Which one?"

He knew the answer Takeya wanted him to give.

And, by majority vote, it was the one most likely to be approved.

"Being the three of us is better… That's what Setsuna wants."

He also knew that the answer he chose would be classified as the "minority opinion" answer.

"But where has that stubbornness got you? Setsuna-chan and Touma are both hurting, and so are you."
"*Why* does it have to be three? That's what I don't get!"

But, there was no other choice.

Because he felt that attraction to Setsuna, the one who clung to that incorrect answer.

"Your whole relationship is gonna rupture that way!"

Because he loved seeing her trying so hard to sweep away the wounds of her past, then getting depressed because it wasn't working, struggling, and then trying again, smiling through her tears…

I liked Haruki-kun as the committee chair.

I liked it when he lectured me. I enjoyed it when he scolded me.

I was glad to have him, whether as a boyfriend or as a friend.

I thought I was okay with it, if he treated other girls the same way.

I liked how he normally was.

Saying "Good morning," like normal. Saying "Goodbye," like normal.

Listening to me like normal, admonishing me like normal…

Having him treat me nicely, like normal, was very comfortable.

Not giving me any special treatment, like the other boys…

But getting just a little bit flustered with me. It made me happy.

I would be lying if I said I hadn't dreamed about dating a boy.

But, after what happened in middle school, I was a bit scared.

So, someone like him, who was serious and straight-laced, but still kind, was ideal for me.

Maybe it's a bit arrogant of me to say this, but you could say he was "completely perfect."

But Kazusa's values were so completely different from mine…

She didn't acknowledge Haruki as the committee chair who was nice to everyone.

She couldn't endure him concerning himself with everybody.

How do I put it… Kazusa might get angry with me for saying this,

But she wanted him to be a prince, who would only look at her.

And, and… in accordance with what Kazusa wanted, he decided to become that prince.

A prince, for the only girl he considered a princess…

Haruki chose not the girl everyone treated as an idol, but the girl everyone treated as though she didn't exist.

He chose not the girl he alone treated normally, but the girl he alone treated like an idol.

And to Setsuna, who hated being given special treatment and fell in love with Haruki, who treated her normally, this dilemma was difficult to endure.

I can't win against Kazusa.

I don't want to beat her, but even if I did want to, I never could…

No one could rival such a straightforward girl.

To Setsuna, Kazusa seemed like an exceedingly different entity.

Because she was a girl who maintained an impossible balance—the pettiness of an elementary-schooler, the romanticism of a middle-schooler, and the seriousness of an adult, all at once.

And because Setsuna was just a bit more mature than Kazusa.

And I don't want to rival her.

Because, I'm like Kazusa, having loved him just the same amount as her…

And I wanted him to like me as much as Kazusa.

However, Setsuna hadn't realized…

That she really was only "a bit" more mature than Kazusa.

That her feelings really weren't that different from Kazusa's.

Kazusa, who wanted to be the only number one in his eyes.

Setsuna, who also wanted to be his number one.

In the end, either of them would be hurt by being number two…

I can't call him "Haruki-kun" any more.

I'm not a girl who can be called "Setsuna" by him any more.

But I don't want to start calling him "Kitahara-kun" now.

And having him call me "Ogiso" would make me cry uncontrollably.

So, I can't see him.

I don't know what to call him, or what I want to be called…

"I made a promise."
"Haruki…"
"I promised that I would never leave her, not unless she cut me off herself. I promised…"

He picked up the guitar that he had dropped earlier.

"It's a promise I have to keep, no matter what else I may leave behind…"
"Even if it means hurting Touma more than you already have?"
"…"

He held it on his knees, strummed it lightly.

His hands had gone slightly numb with cold, and the strings hurt a bit as they dug into his fingers.

But, right now, all he wanted was to feel some pain.

Although, compared with the pain he had made the two girls feel, this was practically nothing…

"Hey, Takeya."
"Hm?"
"Did I screw up?"
"Dunno."
"What am I supposed to do about this…?"
"Beats me."

The movements of his fingers steadily grew faster, bringing control to the monotonous sounds, and changing them into a song.

"…Nah, I'm kidding. Look, I'll take care of it."
"Takeya…?"
"Oh, wait… that might come off wrong. Io and I will both take care of it."
"Then…"
"No need to rush… First, the five of us need to get together."

It was the song he had been playing just before.

That fleeting song, with a melody and lyrics that suited this freezing season.

"Once Touma's got her endorsement for sure, why don't the five of us all go skiing?"
"Skiing…?"
"Y'know, mess around in a big group, look at the snow, bathe in a hot spring…"
"That would…"
"It doesn't have to be three people, right? You don't have to leave one person out of a trio that way, see?"

Messing around, snow, hot springs, and that oath…

He strummed the strings more forcefully, trying to drown out the memories rushing around his head.

"Well, there you go. We'll handle the details. I'll get in touch once it's all set."
"If you keep spending all this time on me, you won't have as much time for dating yourself."
"…I'd rather be in a group of five than alone with a girl, honestly."
"…"
"So, keep it up in April, Haruki."

Outside the window, the sky was dark and somber, and it looked like it could start snowing at any moment.

"Five…?"
"We'll be there, Setsuna. Takeya and I will."
"Io…"

Setsuna let her feelings overflow.

Let her tears overflow.

Her crying fit gradually slowed, and when it had tapered off…

Io murmured to Setsuna.

"You can keep calling him 'Haruki-kun.' You can keep being 'Setsuna' to him."
"I… I can…?"
"But you have to loosen up a little bit in your connection with him."

Just as Takeya said to Haruki…

Or, really, she was passing on the strategy that the two of them had discussed and settled upon, around three years ago.

"You'll be glad to have Haruki there, right? And Touma-san?"
"Y-Yeah…"
"Okay, then… Will you stop this, Setsuna?"
"…"
"…Will you?"
"…I… I will."

Setsuna hesitated for at least half a minute before giving that simple, two-word answer…

"I'll stop… I will… I won't talk about wanting to be a trio any more…!"
"Setsuna…"
"So, don't tell anyone… Don't tell Kazusa, or Haruki-kun, about how I feel!"
"I would never tell them… I mean, we're best friends, right?"
"Ah… aah… uwaaaah…!"

And at that moment, even though she had just stopped crying, her face crumpled once again.

"Sheesh… Who would believe you were the school idol, to see you now?"
"Ah… aaaah…"

Setsuna let her tears flow again.

This time, it wasn't anything so simple as a crying fit—this was wailing, wrung all the way from her throat.

"Io, I… Aaaaaah…!"

But these weren't tears of regret…

They were forward-facing tears, an oath that she would never turn back again.

"Setsuna… You're gonna end up an even better girl than you are now. A perfect idol, who would turn any guy's head."

Never cling desperately to the "trio" again.

Never try to break two of them out of the trio again.

Never run away from being two, and end up alone again.

Because this was something Setsuna had done long ago.

The guitar's melody reached the roof.

It was a song of illicit love, heartbreak… and growth.

The tiniest bit of snow began to flutter down out of the sky, as though drawn by that fleeting timbre.

Hurting a little, waiting to heal, hurting a little more…

Through that process, over and over, I can grow up.

Setsuna implored the snow. Prayed to the snow.

I'll give it everything I have…

I'll take my time, and keep at it, until all of my wounds are healed.

So, until then, snow, wrap my feelings up gently.

Only a little time after that, on February 14th…

Kazusa Touma was accepted into the Kisaragi College of Music.

Twinkle Snow ~Dream~ VII

Epilogue I

"Ack, it's cold out here!"
"Looks like it might start snowing again!"
"Seriously? There's still snow in our yard from last weekend…"

As the classmates exited through the front door, they each looked up at the sky in turn, their gripes venting out with white breaths.

Their number increased by one, then two, and finally more than ten, bringing the crowd in the street in front of the Ogiso house to an almost unmanageable level.

"None of you have forgotten anything? All right, great. And thanks so much for today, really."

And once the last person had stepped out, the day's leading actress looked out and thanked them all.

February 14th.

Setsuna's combination birthday party and graduation celebration party had gone off without a hitch.

"See you, Setsuna!"
"See you tomorrow!"
"Ugh, I don't *want* to go to school tomorrow…"
"Well, you have to. Today's Thursday."
"I guess I could just skip it if I want to. It's not like anything's gonna be happening in class."
"I'm definitely going… There's only so much time left to spend with Ogiso-chan, you know."
"You don't get to complain. You screwed around so much you couldn't even get a recommendation."
"Ah, ahaha… Well, anyway…"

She had called up her friends.

Lots of them.

Just like in middle school, she called out to every single one of her classmates.

Just like in middle school, the Ogiso house was filled with people.

It may have been the first time this year that Setsuna had sincerely, genuinely laughed.

"Phew, it's finally over…"
"I haven't eaten anything…"
"We did it… Seriously, thank you, Io, Takeya-kun."

And those who, in both a good sense and a bad sense, were in the center of the ring, combination promoters and assistants, exchanged some last words with Setsuna.

"I mean, it was basically like a graduation party, so we should be thankful to you for letting us use your place."
"No, you can have your graduation party with your own class. Why would you choose *now* to start hitting on all the girls from our class?"
"Well, I just finally realized how many other high-level girls there are in class A. They just don't get as much attention because of how incredible the number-one is…"
"Thank you, I mean it…"
"Hey, you don't have to get that serious…"
"We really just barged in and partied it up however we wanted."
"No, really. Thank you."
"…You're welcome."

With a smile that held greater sincerity than any bow of the head could have shown, Setsuna offered the two of them her boundless thanks.

After all, the fact that today's party went so smoothly…

Indeed, the fact that today's party happened at all… was because of their encouragement.

"Good night, you two!"
"We'll see you next month for skiing, Setsuna-chan. Skiing! How about that!"
"I'm trying snowboarding this season, so it'd be cool if we found a place where you can do either."
"Should we have a strategy meeting right now, then? At some diner somewhere?"
"Uh, with just you?"
"Is that a problem?"
"Mm… Nah, yeah, you know what? Let's go."
"…Wow, who would've seen *that* coming?"
"Don't be weird. You're the one who invited me."

Even after the two of them disappeared around the corner, the sound of their chatter echoed through the neighborhood for a little while.

"…Phew."

And, after their voices had vanished completely, Setsuna looked up at the sky, letting a white sigh out into the air.

Today had truly been a blast.

Supremely fulfilling.

It brought back faint memories of the days in middle school when all of her classmates, boys and girls alike, called her "Setsuna."

And so, starting tomorrow…

"Congratulations on your acceptance… Kazusa."

She swore that winter would shut away that final, major regret, and she would manage these next few days until graduation, somehow.

Because being "the three of them" was still painful.

They were still in that most enjoyable, and most painful time.

But, in the spring…

In a new season, on a new campus, with new friends, surely…

If she could be in a *pair* again, and the group of *five* coming up, and with even more people…

"All right!"

Blowing a final white breath up toward the night sky…

Setsuna, turning her thoughts to what a chore cleaning up after the party was going to be, opened the front door.

Twinkle Snow ~Dream~ VIII

Epilogue II

"Setsuna…"
"…Huh?"

She had sworn she would manage, somehow…

"Happy birthday."

"Haruki-kun…"

And yet, that final, major regret…

Her friend, who was late to the party…

One of the only people she hadn't been able to invite… had now shown his face.

"I guess I made it just in time?"
"Um, wh-wh… Why?"

She hadn't said anything about it.

Not to Haruki, nor to her other best friend.

"Sorry I'm late… It took me a little while to pick this out."
"Ah…"

Haruki's hand held a large basket, covered in wrapping paper.

"But I wound up going with what the shopkeeper recommended, so you can send any praise or complaints their way."
"Th-Thank you…"

The basket was offered slowly to Setsuna, and passed into both of her hands.

Ba-thump.

"…"

The moment she touched his hand, after all this time…

Setsuna's heart gave such a jump that it was almost shameful.

"Um, Setsuna…"
"Ah, um… Oh, right! Congratulations on Kazusa getting accepted!"

As she attempted to glaze over her shameful reaction, Setsuna's voice, which had jumped a good bit higher on its own, just added a whole new coat to the shame.

"…Yeah, thanks. You should tell that to her, though."
"No, this is fine. I know that if I tell you, it'll get to Kazusa!"

"Huh…?"
"You're on your way to her place right now, right? To celebrate her acceptance?"
"Oh, um… well…"
"B-Bye, then! Thanks for the present! See you later!"

She wanted him to vanish from this place as soon as possible.

She wanted to escape from this place as quickly as possible.

Because, even in this cold, she was burning up.

Because there were limits to how shamefully suspicious she could act.

And because it still hurt.

Being with both of them, or just being with one of them.

…Knowing that the other two were spending time together, without her.

"Wait, Setsuna!"
"…"

So, why…

Why, when he called out her name, did her feet find themselves rooted to the spot?

"Um, listen…"
"I have to start cleaning up… We can talk tomorrow."
"It has to be now."
"Wh-Why?"
"There are… only two hours of your birthday left, but…"
"My…?"
"I want the three of us to celebrate it together."
"?!"

She'd had a feeling.

She had a notion that Haruki might speak that *taboo phrase.*

"What… are you talking about, Haruki-kun?"

But there was no guarantee that having predicted it would keep her from experiencing the shock when it actually happened.

"You're on your way to celebrate Kazusa's acceptance, right? You have to be together with Kazusa today."
"Yes, together."
"W-Well, then…"
"Why don't we go to Kazusa's place together, right now?"
"Kazusa's…?"
"The three of us can have a party in her basement studio."

The moment Haruki brought up that place, that holy ground for the three of them…

A scene from half a year ago revived itself vividly in Setsuna's mind.

"We can celebrate your birthday, and Kazusa's acceptance."

A vocalist, a keyboardist, and a guitarist—an incomplete band, without even a drummer.

A snap decision, made with neither personnel nor skill nor time, the majority made up of easy-going optimists, relying completely on the genius of the minority.

Practicing, rehearsing, eating, chatting, arguing, dozing off, waking up again, practicing, rehearsing…

The three of them together, laughing, yelling at each other, rushing through with the peculiar high tension of the dawn after an all-nighter…

All of it happened in that room.

Those ecstatic days.

Those treasured memories.

"We… We can't do that."
"Why not…?"

But Setsuna mobilized all her powers of reason to cut off those memories.

"It'll hurt Kazusa…"

Otherwise, all of her grief and tears from the past few days would have gone to waste.

"Kazusa always wants to be alone with you, Haruki-kun. Even more on an important day like this, right? It wouldn't be right for me to be there…"

Because she had already given up…

"It won't hurt Kazusa! I won't let her be hurt any more…"

Because she had given up, nothing could sway her any more.

"What… does that mean?"

She would give her blessings to Kazusa and to Haruki, and continue down her own new path.

"Well, I mean… um…"

A road along which she might intersect with them a little, but wouldn't have any deep association with them.

Yes, that was best. No more lingering regrets…

"I mean there's… nothing separating me and Kazusa any more."
"Huh…?"

Nothing…?

Nothing connecting Haruki and Setsuna?

And nothing separating Haruki and Kazusa…?

"You mean…"
"…Um."
"…"

The awkwardness in his attitude, more than his words, told her everything.

Told her that Haruki and Kazusa were bound by an extremely powerful link.

…That they had become tied together.

"Yes, I do like Kazusa."
"…"
"But I want to be with you forever, too, Setsuna."

She knew.

She already knew that Kazusa and Haruki were lovers in *that sense.*

"Maybe that's unfair, or cruel, but… You're a dear friend to me. Could it work?"

But, when she heard it stated outright, by Haruki himself…

"Um, you know… Kazusa may be moody, and selfish, and cagey, and prickly, which makes it hard for her to get along with people, but…"

All of the heat steadily left Setsuna's body.

"But she likes you, Setsuna, just like I do."

Cold spread through her, eroding all the way into her heart.

"So, I know it might be a little uncomfortable for a while, but… Can the three of us keep going like this?"

Spreading, trying frantically to freeze over whatever feeling—its color unknown—was threatening to burst out at any moment.

"Can you keep being Kazusa's best friend?"

But…

Setsuna herself could no longer tell whether she was exploding, or perfectly calm.

"Maybe I've made the wrong call…"

Yes, you have…

"But, can't we just try? If it fails, can't we keep trying over and over again?"

No, Haruki-kun.

You've mistaken me.

Setsuna knew.

She knew that Haruki believed, purely, from the bottom of his heart, in their friendship.

"Is it too much to ask?"
"…"

And Setsuna also knew…

That, although Haruki seemed to understand, he really didn't know anything at all.

How much Setsuna had cried, how much she had suffered,

And how much she had resolved herself to cast away—he knew nothing of it…

"Setsuna, um…"
"Hey, Haruki-kun."
"Huh…?"

Setsuna smiled sweetly and took one small step toward Haruki.

"Hold this."
"O-Okay…?"

And she returned the potted plant she had just received to him.

"Hang on tight, okay? You can't let go of it."
"Setsuna, what exactly…"

Of course, as he had been instructed, Haruki received the potted plant from Setsuna and held it carefully in both hands, so as not to drop it.

As a result, in that moment, both of Haruki's hands were occupied…

"Mm…"
"?!"

So he couldn't stop Setsuna's hands, cupping his cheeks…

Setsuna's body, moving in close to him…

Or Setsuna's lips, pressing against his own.

"Mm, mm…"
"Mm… ah…"

I'm sorry, Haruki-kun.

I'm a genuine liar. An awful, wicked girl.

A traitor who doesn't know when to give up.

Setsuna knew that this was a game with no chance of victory.

I'm going to make this an honorable defeat.

I'm going to throw away being friends, being the three of us, and let you reject me.

I'm going to disappear from your lives.

She knew that this would break the three of them.

She knew that all of them would be hurt.

She knew that, most likely, she would end up the most miserable of them all.

But… But, you know…

If there's that millionth of a millionth chance…

A possibility that's nearly zero, but not quite zero…

And, just the smallest bit…

She hoped that Haruki would make the worst choice of all…

Twinkle Snow ~Dream~ IX

Epilogue III

"!!!!"

With a voiceless scream, she woke suddenly.

"…Ah?"

The moment she opened her eyes, she was met by light from the east, shining through her window, and a familiar ceiling.

It was a morning like any other.

A morning like any other, three years after that winter.

"Phew…"

After shaking her head slightly, she slowly sat up, turning the vague memory from moments before over in her mind.

…Or, maybe *he* did.

…Or, maybe, he and she both.

"I… ruined it again."

It was another possibility, a dream, different from reality.

Not like what happened three years ago, when three became two and one, and then one and one and one, but an attempt to reach a future in which all three of them could smile and find happiness.

They had lost track of how many times it had happened…

But he, and she, still unable to reach an answer that all three of them wanted, atoned for their sins in this way, every single night.

Twinkle Snow ~Dream~ Analysis

Twinkle Snow Dream Analysis

The first scene of this story—following the brief framing moment at the very start—is a happy, domestic image: Setsuna teaches Kazusa, her best friend, how to cook, because Kazusa is worried about not being able to make anything for her boyfriend. Meanwhile, said boyfriend—Setsuna's other dearest friend—warns them both that they really ought to get back to studying, for Kazusa's sake. Apart from Kazusa's heightened emotional sensitivity, it seems as though very little has changed, which is exactly as Setsuna wants it to be. The lovers and their cupid: the three of them, all together.

The first sign that things might not be quite as ideal as they look actually comes through Takeya and Io, and their discomfort while witnessing Haruki and Kazusa leaning all over each other in the third section. In the moment it might simply come off as exasperation in the face of two sweethearts displaying affection for each other (albeit in their own idiosyncratic ways), especially combined with Setsuna's bright energy as she shows up and sweeps everyone off for their end-of-exams karaoke party; but we know how much Takeya and Io care about Setsuna, and it's likely that at least some of their "indigestion" comes from worries about her state of mind regarding this whole thing. Indeed, it is during her conversation with Io on the way to the karaoke spot that Setsuna finally states outright that she "lost," introducing the idea that she and Kazusa were rivals, competing over Haruki. At this point Setsuna herself is still acting as though everything is fine, but clouds have begun to appear.

The cracks in Setsuna's resolve become clearer during the trio's Christmas party at the inn, when she falters in the middle of her final toast. Haruki and Kazusa are quick to reassure her that the three of them will remain just that, the three of them, the next year and the next year and the next, forever, but Setsuna acknowledges to herself later that no dream can last forever. It worsens in the next section, as her desire for time alone with Haruki (found through his insistence upon walking her home from school) asserts itself more strongly, until her phone conversation-gone-sour with Kazusa, and her emotional breakdown immediately thereafter, finally brings home to her that this group of three thing she wanted so badly really isn't going to work.

Suddenly, she can't even bring herself to see Haruki at all any more. She fakes a cold to get out of crossing paths with him at Kazusa's competition performance, she starts waiting until the last minute to show up at school, staying in class during breaks, and leaving early just to avoid seeing him, she considers switching majors in college so she and Haruki won't be in the same department any more (even though, as Io later points out, she went into the Politics and Economics department *because* Haruki was going to be there as well). The pain that the mere concept of "the three of them" causes her has become so severe that she starts wondering whether she and Haruki will have to change the names by which they address each other. This question in particular echoes several other significant name-related moments in the course of the trio's history—Setsuna and Kazusa finally beginning to call one another by name, for example—so her despair at the thought of having to take things back a step, to become "Ogiso" and "Kitahara-kun" again, is similarly significant.

At this point, Takeya and Io reenter the picture to call Haruki and Setsuna out in parallel. Haruki's problem lies in the desire to keep both of the girls he cares about, without drawing a more distinct line, even though a distinction has clearly formed itself, all the more with the new level of physical intimacy he and Kazusa recently reached; Setsuna's problem lies in the contradictions of her wish to keep both of her dearest friends and her unavoidable feelings for Haruki. This wish she cherished, this ideal of the three of them, is causing both her and their relationship to fracture. Unfortunately, the conclusions reached by each of these conversations don't fit together—even though Setsuna shows some promise in her decision to let go of her fixation on everything remaining the same between the three of them, Haruki is determined to keep on with it, because he sincerely believes that that's what Setsuna wants.

Hence, after Setsuna's birthday party in the next section, a party to which neither Haruki nor Kazusa was invited, during which she found herself feeling truly happy and fulfilled for the first time in months, Haruki's sudden appearance at her door with a gift shatters everything. He doesn't mean to—he sincerely thinks that Setsuna will want to come with him, to celebrate together at Kazusa's place. He admits that he wants to keep things as they are, even if it's selfish of him. He has refused to take Takeya's advice and draw a line—and his adamant insistence upon honesty leads him to all but state outright that he and Kazusa are now sexually involved with each other. There was no way for a declaration like that to lead anywhere positive, and following it up by reiterating that he and Kazusa still love Setsuna and want to be with her is too little, too late. In one sense, it seems as though that sort of extreme shock might have been enough to cut Setsuna loose from her obsession for real, for good; she does say to herself that she's prepared to throw everything away, and disappear out of their lives.

But then she kisses him, and it's not without a tiny sliver of hope, and that hope is the undoing of the entire thing.

The lack of names in the very last section is interesting, as well as the deliberate ambiguity regarding pronouns, because this scene could be describing *her,* or *him,* or even both. It draws them together by placing the blame, and the punishment, the nightly re-living or re-imagining of the choices they made, on both of them. The previous section might not state outright whether Haruki made the "wrong choice" that Setsuna hoped he would, but the lament over having "ruined it again" suggests that he did. Either way, their failure to draw the line that they were both told to draw caused the whole relationship between the three of them to collapse. It is a grim, grey ending, the complete opposite of the warm, idealistic scene at the start, and a stark depiction of the end of a dream, whether literal or figurative.

Koharu After Story

Koharu: Sun After Storm

"All right, does everybody have their drinks? Great, then let's get this party started! Sugiura-san, welcome to the Kaiou Graph editorial department! Cheers!"
"Cheers!"
"H-hey, hang on, Matsuoka! I'm the boss! Why are you ignoring me and taking the lead yourself?!"
"Listen, if we let *you* handle the toast, Hamada-san, all the froth would disappear…"

In a certain famous izakaya chain, on the sixth floor of a certain building in the Onjuku shopping district…

In this commonplace establishment, precisely the sort that a completely disorganized coordinator would frantically pick on the day of the occasion, everyone lifted their glasses together with this energetic toast declaration—not to be drowned out by the hustle and bustle all around—and began their banquet.

"Now, Kohacchi, give us a few words!"
"…Um, I'm sorry, Suzuki-san, but would you mind not using that nickname? I don't think it gives a good impression."
"Come on, don't be so stiff. Look, all eyes are on you now."

And so this girl, suddenly given the overly-friendly nickname of "Kohacchi" and feeling a little flustered by all of the attention, nevertheless coughed once to clear her throat, stood all the way up…

"Um… Everyone, thank you very much for holding this party for me today."

And, with a seriousness in her face and voice that were completely unsuited to this laid-back venue, she began her extremely stiff speech.

"I am still only a newcomer, and a part-time worker, so I won't be of much use, but I want to learn quickly on the job so that I can be helpful to everyone, so please, train me as strictly as you can. Thank you very much, and I look forward to working with you all."

After ending with a very deep bow, the girl sat back down on the floor, and bowed her head slightly once more.

To the end, her speech was overly sincere, subdued, with no playing around—altogether lacking in flair, in a way that seemed at odds with her charming looks and mannerisms.

"We've got high hopes for you, Kohacchi. Lately, none of our part-timers have stuck around for more than a week…"
"Don't say stuff like that, Suzuki-san. You'll make us sound like a sweatshop."

"What are you talking about, Matsuoka? In times like these, with publications in such a slump, no publishing company could survive *without* being a sweatshop."
"Do you have to affirm that so readily, Kizaki-san…?"

But, well, whether it was because they were more experienced members of society as her seniors, or whether they were all just completely irresponsible, the others present let her formal attitude wash right off of them and got swept up in their own lively conversations.

The name of this stiff but lovely girl—no, woman—who seemed somehow to have been received favorably by her new colleagues, was Koharu Sugiura.

A first-year at Aoizumi University, and, as of yesterday, a new part-time worker in the editorial department of Kaiou, a mid-level publishing company.

With her hair in a ponytail, showing more than enough of the innocence left over in one who had only recently turned twenty, she sipped her beer, screwing her face up slightly in distaste.

"Come on, Sugiura-san, chug it all down."
"Th-thank you… Although, I was thinking I might switch over to a sour cocktail soon…"
"Gotcha, gotcha. Here, take a look at the drink menu."

Once the general greetings were out of the way, the food had been brought out, and the time had come for pleasant chit-chat, Matsuoka, the young editor who had coordinated today's get-together, snagged the spot next to Koharu and began talking to her with great energy.

"But what made you think about getting a part-time job with us, Sugiura-san? Is this the kind of field where you want to be employed in the future?"
"Um, yes. I have three reasons… First of all, as you said, I do have an interest in this industry."
"I see, I see… Once you graduate, you should definitely come our way, by all means."

The Kaiou Graph editorial department had few women (none of them his type), so now that Koharu, their first female part-timer in a long while and objectively cute, had appeared on the scene, Matsuoka had no reason not to go after her.

"And, well, I want the money, of course. Being a university student is a lot more expensive than I realized…"
"Yeah, for sure. And what's the third reason?"
"The third reason… is that I want to expand my world, more and more."
"Your world…?"
"Well, all I know right now is my school. My current surroundings are only an illusion of the whole world, right?"
"I-I mean, I guess?"

"In that little world, whenever discrepancies arise, it feels as though the whole world has turned on you, or like you can't trust anything any more—you end up having sad feelings like that on both sides."
"Y-you think so…?"
"So I made a promise with a friend of mine, who lived in that small world with me—that we would both gain bigger worlds for ourselves, outside of each other."
"…"
"I thought, if I could find an adult relationship, that was open and straightforward like the ones I've known, but just a little bit different, that would be wonderful… Oh, I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to go on about myself so much."

Realizing that, at some point, the senior worker sitting next to her had begun to look a little bit lost, Koharu curled in on herself somewhat sheepishly, hurriedly cut off the conversation, and hid her face in the menu in an attempt to gloss over all of it.

But, at this moment, there was no helping that for Koharu…

Because, for the past year, she had never spoken of that oath, and certainly never been able to just spill it out with an ambiguous smile.

Winter of her third year at Houjou High School, with graduation only a few weeks away…

Most people, reluctant to part with their friends, would be dedicating their minds to hopes for trips and the like, but Koharu was on a bed of needles the whole time.

Misunderstandings gave rise to further misunderstandings, and in the end, it was all overwritten by the truth.

She betrayed her best friend in the event, and ultimately, she betrayed her best friend with her own resolve.

She was exposed to attacks out of ill will from those around her, and ultimately, she exposed herself to that ill will deliberately.

She lost everywhere she belonged except for one place, and ultimately, she offered everything up to that one place, and sought it out.

That was why, at present, Koharu Sugiura was a first-year at Aoizumi University.

She could have been a second-year at Houjou University, but she and her friend, though they still acknowledged one another mutually, differed both in university and in school year.

"Yeah, yeah, I know what you mean! You know, I had something happen like that once…"

And so, Matsuoka, completely failing to understand Koharu's grim resolve, still attempted to appeal to some nonexistent sympathy, and shortened the distance between himself and Koharu yet again.

"Wow, that's wild. Y'know, you've got a pretty solid way of thinking, huh?"
"O-oh, no, I wouldn't say that."

He was following the sort of method one learned from one's respected seniors—"If you want to take advantage of a girl's troubles to make a pass, the first step is to affirm everything"—to the letter, which was a brave move, in its own way.

But whether that bravery reached its target, Koharu, was extremely doubtful.

"Y'know, I can't just see you as some stranger. I'm here to give advice, so ask me anything at all. Oh, and do you think I could start calling you 'Koharu-chan,' like Suzuki-san…?"

Then, just as Matsuoka was attempting an even more overbearing attack…

"…I don't think you'd better call her that, Macchan."

Sitting across the table from them, Suzuki, the only woman present apart from Koharu, muttered meaningfully.

"What? What do you mean, Suzuki-san?"
"Well, Kohacchi, she may look serious, but in fact… No, she has an extremely serious boyfriend, exactly as she looks."
"Ggh…?! Hack, hack…"

The one who choked on their half-drunk beer in response to this bombshell statement was not Matsuoka, to whom it was ostensibly directed, but rather the one to whom it was actually directed.

"A-a boyfriend? Really?"
"Oh, yes, a very bothersome boy. He's got a job, he's completely inflexible, and he certainly wouldn't hold back against his superiors. You might throw down the gauntlet at first, Macchan, but he would turn the tables on you with a lecture, and then the fight would be settled."
"Wait, that sounds weirdly like that perfectionist junior of mine who always gets on my nerves… Huh?"

And Matsuoka, suddenly having an excruciatingly clear idea of what Suzuki was getting at with her metaphorical speaking, gasped and whirled around to look at Koharu.

"…Suzuki-senpai, why would you say something like that without any proof?"

Koharu, completely ignoring Matsuoka, retracted her admirable attitude completely, and simply glared coldly at Suzuki.

On top of her own inflexibility, this strong attitude with its tendency to incite enmity in others had hurt her any number of times, but where that was concerned, Koharu would never feel any regret.

"Umm, well… I have three reasons, you see…"
"…Are you trying to start a fight? You are, aren't you?"
"Huh? Huh?"

Unable to keep up with this suddenly explosive atmosphere between the women, Matsuoka looked at each of their faces in turn, but it was clear that he was no longer anywhere near their field of vision.

"First, 'Graduate of Houjou High School' was written on your resume."
"But I was three years younger, so we were never in school together."
"Second, no one has said anything yet, but you definitely just indicated a very specific person."
"Urk…"
"And, third… I saw you yesterday. You were having an argument with Kitahara-kun on the platform at Onjuku Station…"
"…"
"Perhaps you decided to show up at his same workplace unannounced? And then he scolded you, and it turned into a fight… You certainly are the type to go too far and make a big mess of things when you think too hard."
"…That matter has already been resolved, so there is no longer any need for you to worry."

To be sure, they *had* wound up in a massive fight the night before, but for two people who were as mutually inflexible as they were, this was an everyday occurrence…

Winter of her third year at Houjou High School, with graduation only a few weeks away…

Koharu had met a university student three years her senior, fought with him, worked with him, somehow been unable to get along with him, somehow found herself getting interested in him because of that, fallen in love with him before she knew it, and at some point, wished that she could stay by his side even if the whole world turned against her… And so she realized for the first time what an inflexible *woman* she was, from the bottom of her heart.

That man was, and always had been, Haruki Kitahara.

Koharu's inflexible lover, three years ahead of her at Houjou High School, her senior at her former part-time job, and, as of yesterday, her senior yet again in the Kaiou Graph editorial department.

"K-Kitahara again… How many more times does he have to get his hands on the things I can't…?"

"Wellll, mostly that's just you getting what you deserve, Macchan, but in this case, I *suppose* there's a little room for pity."

Reeling from the truth and impact of this new part-timer's words, Matsuoka was crushed by an even deeper sense of defeat, picked up the sake that had arrived at some point, and chugged it in one gulp.

His voice and attitude had lost the light of one aiming for his prey, and now his eyes were the clouded eyes of a dejected loser, his voice hoarse and strained.

"That son of a bitch… Always the first to complain about private life being brought into the office, and yet off he goes to work so gracefully, with his girlfriend waiting on him…"
"You say 'gracefully,' but he showed up two hours earlier than you."
"You're right… That's why he skipped out on this drinking party, saying he was gonna be out collecting material tonight. Damn him…"

It wasn't hard to imagine that, had Haruki been present, the current state of affairs would have been even more difficult to bring under control.

"…I would like to make it clear that this job is completely unrelated to my private life."

Koharu continued with her usual stiffness, in a tone that did absolutely nothing to relieve the gloomy atmosphere that had settled over the group of young people.

"I came here to *work.* While I am working, whoever I may or may not be dating is completely irrelevant."
"You may say that, Kohacchi, but, you know… Even if your initial intention is to do your job, can you be absolutely certain that you won't gradually start to show your true colors, or start getting flirty at work, before you know it?"
"Yes, I'm certain! If you must insist upon doubting me, then from now on, I won't utter a word to Haruki-senpai while we're in the workplace, so please be at ease!"
"I don't think that's a viable work method…"

Koharu Sugiura, the new part-timer at Kaiou…

This tactless girl, with her inflexibility, her strong, inflammatory attitude that had hurt her any number of times, and her complete lack of regret where that was concerned, drained the last bit of beer remaining in her glass, and for some reason ordered a shochu on the rocks rather than the sour cocktail she had mentioned earlier.

"Hey, so, uh, what's the true story here?"
"How am I supposed to answer a question with no subject?"
"I'm talking about your relationship with Kitahara-kun, obviously. You can tell me everything, every single concrete minute detail. No need to keep any secrets."
"That would serve no purpose for me. Also, it's redundant to say 'minute detail,' isn't it?"

"…Kohacchi, are you sure you're not actually Kitahara-kun's clone, rather than his girlfriend?"

Ignoring Matsuoka, who had long since withdrawn from Koharu's side and was now sulkily pouring himself a drink, it was now Suzuki's turn to go into inquiry mode.

"When did you meet? Where? You weren't in high school *or* college together, right? So was it in cram school, or at work, or…"
"How many times do I have to tell you that I keep my work and private life separate?"
"This is a drinking party! It's completely private! As a matter of fact, work talk is out of bounds!"
"I don't believe that's a legitimate argument…"

In the beginning, Koharu had intended to remain silent, but her nature limited her ability to feign ignorance for too long, and so she wound up responding to every little thing.

"Fine, fine! At least just tell us when you met! Say, before the summer of two years ago, or after?"
"…Why are you mentioning such a specific period?"
"Well, there's a certain immature young lady who is just *dying* to know whether you've known him longer than her…"

While Suzuki conversed with Koharu, she poured beer with her left hand and fiddled with her phone with her right hand, sending somebody an email—this was a level of multitasking even beyond what she did at work.

"Regardless of how private the occasion is, there are things one talks about readily with other people, and things one does not."
"Hmm, hmm, I see. In other words, the start of your love affair with Kitahara-kun was so dramatic and romantic that you couldn't possibly tell anyone."
"Please don't let your imagination run away with you."

Koharu was extremely curious to know the recipient of this email, but she was also so serious about everything that she couldn't apply it, so even though her eyes were drawn to Suzuki's phone, she focused on nothing but the conversation.

"All right, next, I want you to tell me what kind of event took place between the two of you back then. All you have to do is answer 'yes' or 'no'!"
"I'm not going to answer. I'm not answering anything."
"I see… So was there some kind of trouble surrounding your future paths in life, for example?"
"I said I'm not going to answer…"
"Or a conflict between friendship and love?"
"Um…"
"A love triangle?"
"?!"

"One of you was already in a relationship?"
"Why are you interrogating me like this?!"

This accusation, to anyone who knew Koharu, would probably be like a boomerang, demonstrating an astonishing level of insistence upon playing innocent, but she just couldn't keep quiet.

"…Don't tell me I hit the mark?"
"Not at all! Not even remotely! Not even this much!"

…in the sort of voice used to praise someone for giving the perfect answer.

"Please, just give me a break already, Suzuki-san."
"Ahaha, sorry, sorry."

The peak of the welcome party, the table that had reached the point of complete informality…

On top of which, within thirty minutes, Koharu had lined up five glasses of shochu and was letting loose with her complaints.

The number of glasses was a fair match to the number of times Suzuki had hit the "send email" button in the same thirty minutes, but it seemed as though she had now been blocked, and a disparity was gradually starting to open up.

"Look, we may be working in the same place now… But it's still only second day we've known each other."
"Well, but we've already been associating with Kitahara-kun for over three years."
"What does that have to do with…"
"Sorry, Sugiura-san. To sum it up, Suzuki, or really all of us, have been using you as a way of investigating Kitahara."
"Huh…?"

At this voice suddenly cutting in, Koharu raised her face and fixed her eyes right in front of her…

"He hardly ever talks about himself. After we've known him for so long, there are things we wish he'd confide in us or rely on us for, even on a private level…"

At some point, two veterans of the Kaiou Graph, Hamada and Kizaki, had turned to Koharu with friendly gazes.

"And suddenly we find Kitahara's girlfriend? Now there's a once-in-a-lifetime chance, especially for that rumor-mongering busybody of a woman."
"Oh, that's harsh. You were the one who came up with this strategy in the first place, Hamada-san."
"But I never told you to barge into that territory so blatantly."
"You may as well have, the moment you said we would use Suzuki."
"Hey, Kizaki, whose side are you on?"

Now, under the circumstances—the secret spilled, a targeted attack instigated by everyone except Matsuoka—Koharu couldn't simply force a smile, but stared dumbfounded into their three faces.

"Well, ah… Sorry about that. We got a little carried away."
"I'm sorry, Kohacchi."
"N-no, it's not really that…"

Still, she couldn't find it in herself to blame them, either.

Because, two years earlier, she had done exactly that.

She had met a university student three years her senior, fought with him, worked with him, somehow been unable to get along with him, somehow found herself getting interested in him because of it…

Run around to every acquaintance she could find, gotten angry, sulked, all for the sake of learning about his past.

And so, two months later, when he finally told her about his high school heartaches, the regrets he still held, and the people who were constantly in his heart, how happy she was…

Because she remembered being so happy that she fell in love, a love that was forbidden in every possible sense.

And…

"You know, back in the day, there were some things about Kitahara-kun that made you kinda nervous just looking at him."
"Yeah, like almost a self-destructive tendency—working without any real consideration for himself."
"We didn't notice it at first, but his boss at his first job had a sharp eye for that sort of thing."
"Didn't have much of a sense of the way other people were looking at her, though, that Mari-san."
"But now, Kitahara is completely different, a lot calmer. It's nice."
"…Does he seem that way? Can everybody see that?"
"So, this change that got us all wondering whether he might have found himself a really great girl is because of your appearance on the scene."
"…"

Listening to this nosy yet pleasant conversation between the three people, Koharu felt her cheeks flushing, and it wasn't because of the alcohol.

She was actually so happy that she thought she might cry.

To know that her lover, the one she worried about more than anyone else, the most important person to her, had had an open-hearted space like this.

That Haruki was able to help Koharu two years ago…

That the two of them had been able to make it through without being crushed, without mutual destruction…

Had been because he had a place like this, supporting him.

Now, Koharu felt confident that what she was trying to do hadn't been a mistake.

"So, Hamada-san, that means we don't have to worry about Kitahara any more, right? If he's got a gal like this waiting for him to come home…"
"Wait, you mean you were serious about that?"
"What, Kizaki-san's business trip to Europe? Didn't that end up conflicting with your engagement gift exchange?"
"Oh, are you getting married? Congratulations… By the way, what was that about Haruki-senpai?"

While Koharu gave her utmost polite blessings, she was keenly interested in a few key words that had just cropped up in the conversation.

"Well, see, since I couldn't go any more, I recommended that Kitahara go in my place, but Hamada-san doesn't seem to agree."
"Listen, all things considered, he's still only in his first year."
"He's right, Kizaki-san. Macchan aside, you've got me, at least. Actually, I'd *love* to go!"
"No, if we gotta send a substitute in, Kitahara's definitely the only option… It's just a matter of language proficiency."
"What?! That's cold, Hamada-san!"
"Feel free to complain *after* you've made an A on the TOEIC…"

Hearing Haruki made the subject of a conversation that was out of her reach both in name and in substance, as someone who had just started her job the day before, Koharu was elated.

It may have been a work-related conversation that she couldn't follow at all, but regardless, Koharu listened to the trio's discussion in a pleasant mood.

"And actually, when it comes to this particular Europe trip, Kitahara might be more qualified than I am in the first place."
"What? Really?"
"Truth is, it was the Ensemble editor-in-chief who approached me about this. Said there was someone he wanted me to interview in Europe…"
"Ensemble… That's a classical music thing… Someone from an orchestra somewhere?"
"No, a pianist. Look, there's this super promising young Japanese player, right?"
"Oh, you mean…!"
"Exactly—Kazusa Touma. She's the daughter of Youko Touma…"
"Ah, gotcha. Then, she would have been in the same school year as Kitahara…"

"Touma… What did you say?"
"Huh?"
"Huh?"
"Huh?"

In that instant, in spite of their moderate drunkenness, the trio felt a strange chill in the air, as though they had suddenly been kicked outside in the middle of winter.

"You're… sending Haruki-senpai to meet with Kazusa Touma…?"
"K-Kohacchi…?"
"What are you saying…? What did I just hear you all say…?!"
"S-Sugiura-san?!"

It took several seconds for them to realize that the true source of this chill was an unexpectedly low, intense voice, emitted from the lovely girl sitting before them.

And the next thing Koharu said only invited them into further confusion.

"I'll go…"
"Huh? What? Where?"
"To Europe, obviously. What are you talking about?"
"That's what we're trying to ask *you…"*
"Anyway!"
"Yeek?!"
"Sending Haruki-senpai to Europe… to a dangerous place like that? I refuse to let him go!"
"Wh-what?"
"Wait, it would clearly be more dangerous for *you* to go, wouldn't it?"
"I'll be fine! I went to Europe for my graduation trip!"
"That's not the problem here…"
"What, my language ability? Fine, I'll take the TOEIC before the trip! And I *will* be given an 'A'!"
"Hey, what's going on with you?!"
"I, I… I've cried a lot up to now, you know! And I've caused a lot of tears myself!"
"Kohacchi, that's not even remotely an answer!"

The image of a weeping face at the window rose up in Koharu's mind.

"So… I can't… I don't want…"

The weeping face of the one who had been Kazusa Touma's best friend, Haruki Kitahara's girlfriend, wrapped in memories that had never left her mind—heart-achingly beautiful, and yet sorrowful.

"No, I don't want this… I don't want Haruki-senpai to go… I don't want to let him go… I… I… augh…!"
"H-hey, whoa! What are you doing?! You two, do something!"
"You don't care, do you? You don't care about me! Because you're the one who

made me cry, Kizaki-san!”
“Whaaat?! Me?!”
“Haruki-senpaaai…!”
“Kitahara! Somebody call Kitahara!”

Up to this point, she had been responding normally, so nobody realized it…

But, at this moment, Koharu Sugiura was already fully, out-of-her-head drunk.

“Ugh…”

The bright morning light shining in through the window… exacerbated Koharu’s headache more and more.

It was the day after that feast of pandemonium.

Koharu woke up to a familiar ceiling, one that she knew from seeing it about once a week… She was in Haruki’s room.

Next to her in the bed slept Haruki, looking dead exhausted for some reason.

She checked the clock. It was 7:30 a.m.

When Koharu tried to think of why her lover, who normally would have long since woken up, would be this fatigued, the numerous reasons caused another headache to assail her, and she rushed to the bathroom in an attempt to escape.

“Uuugh…”

And now, it was eight o’clock.

Having showered, Koharu faced her towel-clad reflection in the mirror, and made the same anguished face that she had just seen on Haruki.

She couldn’t remember very clearly what had happened… oh, if only that were true.

Forcing the members of the editorial department to sit down when they tried to leave, spending half an hour telling them about how she and Haruki got together, weeping and clinging to Haruki when he finally came to get her, begging him to carry her on his back… She wished she couldn’t remember any of that.

“This job is completely unrelated to my private life.”

This all-too-false declaration ricocheted around the back of Koharu’s head like a boomerang.

…And the email from one of her kind-hearted seniors, who had take all of these declarations down as though keeping minutes at a meeting, just made Koharu feel more and more like running away this early in the morning.

“…I can’t go to that job any more.”

She didn’t feel that much regret over embarrassing herself, or causing embarrassment for Haruki.

It had never been one of her primary concerns to make a good showing in the first place, and her relationship with Haruki was past the point where this sort of thing would put any strain on it.

What hurt more than that was what she had been hiding… no, what she had been trying to hide, this whole time—the intensity of her *womanhood.*

The one reflected in the mirror was, of course, Koharu herself.

Showered, wrapped in a towel, her hair undone…

Seeing herself, with her sleek, naturally flowing long hair, forced her to remember her violent emotions from the day before.

She had never let Haruki see her hair like this.

At this point, she couldn’t say whether it was consciously or unconsciously…

But, most likely, she would continue to keep herself from showing him this style.

“All right!”

Forcibly shaking her still-aching head, Koharu began gathering her hair together, and in her mind, she retracted her own words from moments before in an instant.

Of course she would go to work today.

And she would apologize to everyone.

And, and… From now on, she would give it her all in that place… together with the one she loved.

Her seniors might still be angry.

If so, if she apologized with all her might, and it turned into an argument…

Then, in the end, she would work fervently to reconcile with them.

Come on, that’s enough.
I mean, I’m pretty intense.
Intense enough that I would secretly show up with no warning at senpai’s workplace.
There’s… no reason that my seniors wouldn’t know that.

“There… all done.”

The usual ponytail in the mirror.

This was the true Koharu Sugiura.

The completion of this shameful, deeply jealous, foolish woman, who belonged to Haruki alone.

"Good morning, senpaaai…"

With a bright, cheerful voice that gushed forth from her heart of its own accord…

Koharu flung away the bath towel, and slipped smoothly back into the bed where Haruki slept.

Kazusa After Story (Digital Novel)

It's Not White Album Season Any More

There, the sounds of many people, playing their many instruments, flew all about through the air.

The children, crying and seeing off the men who waved as they left.

The couples standing cheek-to-cheek, who would never part, no matter how much time passed.

The grandfather, grumbling and pulling his suitcase behind him as the grandmother hurried him along.

The young people who passed through the gate in high spirits as their friends waved and cheered them off.

And the speakers near the ceiling, rattling off place names, times, airlines, and the numbers of arriving and departing flights.

In other words, this was that most important place for comings and goings, and all the sounds they made—the airport lobby.

"Two o'clock, huh?"

And in this place, which was even more crowded and bustling than usual, was a young lady, quietly speaking to herself.

She had long, black hair, and an elegant glamor that made her stand out, even among these surroundings that threatened to absorb her.

Her small face, with its perfectly balanced long, narrow eyes and slightly thin lips, boasted true Eastern beauty.

Her body was like that of a model, somewhat tall in stature, with a tight waist and full breasts.

But then there was her attitude—stiflingly filling out her well-blessed body, the ill-mannered way she sat in her chair grasping her knees, her almost shamefully aloof air.

…The name of this lady, young and yet idle, beautiful and yet eccentric, was Kazusa Touma.

And, in spite of all of this, she was a famous pianist, known to tens of millions of people worldwide.

"Come to think of it, I suppose it *is* about to be Christmas…"

Kazusa vacantly surveyed the airport displays, the luggage that people were carrying, and finally hit upon both the reason for the congestion, and the current season.

It was already winter.

This was an airport in winter.

For Kazusa Touma, airports held a great many memories.

Breakdowns, declarations of feelings, separations, returns home, and new journeys.

Casting aside, spilling, overflowing, reawakening…

Countless pains slept in Narita, that airport in Japan.

But, right now…

And, right here…

"Dürfte ich mich neben Sie setzen? (May I sit next to you?)"
"Wie? Ähm… ja bitte. (Hm? Oh… Yes, of course.)"

The question that the middle-aged lady asked, and the words that immediately came from Kazusa's mouth, were not Japanese, as the words overflowing back then had been.

Because this was the Wien-Schwechat International Airport.

Because this was the current home of Kazusa Touma—no, Kazusa, née Touma.

"Be at the airport at noon. I'll come as soon as my meeting is over."

She had looked at the text message that had been waiting for her on the phone this morning twice—no, three times—no, she had lost count of how many times, but she scanned over it again.

It hadn't just been a text. Last night, in bed, the appointed meeting time for today had been told to her over and over, almost like pillow talk, and this time, for once, Kazusa actually held faithfully to it.

Which was how she had wound up idling away almost two hours in this airport, and it was now just past two p.m.

The stated departure time was precisely three p.m.

If they didn't board soon, there was going to be trouble.

But…

"Honestly. How long is it going to be before I can eat lunch?"

Kazusa grumbled in a tone that showed no sense of impending crisis, rummaged around in a pocket of her luggage, pulled out her fifth chocolate bar since her arrival at the airport, and stuffed her mouth with it.

But even as the complaints dribbled out of her mouth this way, Kazusa was neither angry nor in a rush.

For someone like her, who had been tamed into laziness, time was not a limited commodity.

In days long past, waiting around idly for someone (a specific someone) would have irritated her, but not any more.

She was used to waiting.

She had once waited over five hours before exchanging a kiss.

She had waited over five years to achieve her desires.

When she thought about those days, both sweet and bitter, beloved and maddening, a little bit of waiting around with a definite end was neither painful nor itchy for her.

"The meeting is stretching on. Just a little longer. I promise we'll get onto the plane in time!"
"Making me show up early, and then running this far behind yourself… You're a failure as a member of society."

After opening this long awaited follow-up message and cursing a bit, Kazusa quickly shut her phone and turned the brief text over and over in her head.

In general, Kazusa did not reply to texts.

For that matter, she didn't send texts.

After all these years of living together, Kazusa still hadn't broken out of the comfort of "a little flirtation between lovers."

Her innate disposition, aggravated by spoiling and indulgence, which led her to find many things bothersome, was also somewhat to blame.

But even greater than that was a lofty mentality, grounded in the Japanese virtue known as "*MOTTANAI.*"

…When communication was absolutely necessary, it was impossible for her to let it go without hearing his voice.

She would make a call, disparage him to her heart's content, be met with tedious objections and lectures, snap back, hang up with a sharp parting remark, regret it immediately, start to redial but get a call from the other end instead, pick up with an expression of great delight, be given another drawn-out sermon, finally get a

small apology at the very end, hang up, chuckle to herself, and, if nobody else was around, be seized with fits of laughter.

After all these years of living together, Kazusa still hadn't broken out of the comfort of "a little flirtation between lovers."

"*I've caught a taxi. I'll be there in about fifteen minutes.*"
"That's a pretty optimistic estimate, stupid…"

About ten minutes had passed since the last message.

After giving this short continuation a light retort, Kazusa did nothing but stare vacantly up at the airport ceiling and picture him, sending her the message in a mad rush, hurrying the driver along.

She didn't read a magazine, or listen to music on her phone, or watch a movie.

These time-killers that would drive *him* out of her head were ridiculous. She couldn't possibly do any of that.

She refused to give up the luxury of letting this one person permeate her mind and body.

Whether or not her fingers were moving over the keyboard, the space in which the wings of Kazusa's imagination fluttered was at once too large and too small.

"*Okay, go ahead and board without me. I'll catch up with you soon.*"
"Ugh. Why."

Kazusa read this post-script of a message, and… still didn't move.

It was clearly an important message, regarding an important bit of business to take care of, but she freely ignored it.

She looked at the airport clock. There were exactly thirty minutes until boarding time.

The time limit was approaching.

At this point, if Kazusa didn't see the process through, they weren't going to be able to avoid missing the flight.

But…

"…Why are you here, Kazusa?"
"That would be because *you* didn't make it in time, Haruki."

Three o'clock p.m.

Not at the boarding gate, or on the plane, but in the same airport lobby.

Now that the two of them had finally carried out their reunion after their communication exchange, the plane that they were supposed to be on was right on the verge of taking off into the heavens.

"I told you to board on your own, at least…"
"No, you didn't. All you said was that you would definitely catch up."

This young man standing in front of Kazusa, who was still grasping her knees in her chair, looking as troubled as ever in his coat, was Haruki Kitahara.

Kazusa's manager and promoter, whose surname was the same as her current surname.

"I would have caught up to you."
"Oh, no, I couldn't trust that. Remember? Two years ago, in New York, I let you wheedle me into getting to the place before you, and when you finally linked up with me, it was thirty minutes before the performance."
"And *you* certainly seem to have a good memory for old bygones…"

Even though he had broken his promise to Kazusa and fallen far behind, he hardly flinched at all, instead giving an answer that was half-serious and half-perfunctory, as though he were humoring a spoiled child.

"I had a really hard time, you know. Since you weren't there, I couldn't go out to eat, and I got so sick of room service for three days and three nights. I thought I was going to die."
"No, you could have gone out. You can speak English plenty well…"

Even as she confronted him, Kazusa knew well that Haruki's extreme busyness all the way up until right before they left the country had all been for her sake, but she pushed all of the responsibility onto him and allowed herself to sulk as much as she liked.

"Anyway, everything about this is your fault. I don't have a single thing to apologize for."
"No, look… Come on, that's enough."

Because they each understood…

That the other wasn't *really* angry.

And each was certain that the other would forgive the whole thing very shortly.

"For now, there are two tickets available from cancellations for a flight two hours from now… It has three connections, but…"
"The seats aren't separate, are they?"
"Well, it looks like they're consecutive numbers… They're economy, though."
"Are they? Well, that's perfect."
"How, exactly…?"

Because if they had gotten first class tickets, adjacent seats would be too far apart from each other, making it difficult to hold hands the entire time.

"We have to restrain ourselves from unnecessary expenses. Our management is pretty strict."

…Even if he had figured this out, she still wouldn't have said it aloud.

"In which case, I wish that you at least had gotten on the plane just now."

At some point, the chair next to Kazusa's had been freed up, and Haruki finally sat down.

And, as though she had been waiting for it, Kazusa leaned her entire body weight over onto Haruki's side.

Of course, Haruki took this weight perfectly naturally, and opened up his shoulder to make it easier for Kazusa's head to rest on.

"So, we've got two more hours to wait."
"We're lucky that we even managed to grab a flight for *today.*"
"Oh, yes… I'm *very* lucky today."
"Look, I apologize for being late, so cut it out with the sarcasm."
"Intolerant as ever."

Without any sarcasm whatsoever, Kazusa genuinely reflected upon the day's good fortune.

Waiting for two idle hours with thoughts of Haruki.

Waiting for two idle hours *with* Haruki.

There was no greater happiness in the world than this.

"By the way, Haruki, let me tell you a secret… Tonight is Christmas Eve."
"Yes, I'm aware of that."
"And yet, you've been doing nothing but work since early this morning… Are you really European?"
"You *are* European, and yet you don't work on any days other than Christmas, either."
"It's *Christmas Eve!* And yet we're spending it on an airplane. At this rate, the moment we cross the International Date Line, Christmas will already be over."
"You should be happy, though. It may not be much of a substitution, but at least the in-flight meals will be Christmas themed."
"Hey, will you trade my chicken for your cake?"

What the two of them exchanged, both from outsiders' viewpoints and from their own when they thought back over it rationally, were nothing but pointless, wholly insubstantial conversations.

"Why don't we go ahead and eat something now, before the in-flight meal?"
"I'm not really hungry."
"I'm starving… I haven't eaten anything since this morning."
"You should have had breakfast, at least. I've heard it's different when you're working with your brain."
"Never thought I'd hear that from the person who has never once made me breakfast in the past few years."
"I was just staying faithful to the instructions I received from a certain someone a few years ago, who told me, 'Don't make breakfast any more.'"
"You don't think you could reexamine that a bit?"
"Cooking is simple. But my fingers are crucial tools for my work, so I don't use them on anything wasteful."
"Well, I guess I don't really have anything to say to that."
"I use my fingers for two things only: playing the piano, and digging my nails into your back."
"Are you aware of how bad *that's* been hurting…?"

His expression was lax, absent-minded, devoid of tension or any shred of seriousness.

"Well, if you're that hungry, why don't you have one of my chocolate bars?"
"That would be amazing. I'm seriously about to pass out."
"…Wait, you're really gonna eat it? Selfish jerk."
"Now, wait just a minute. Do you even remember what we were literally just talking about?"
"Look, I've only got one left…"
"And you don't have the sort of admirable attitude that would allow you to split it in half and share it together?"
"Hey, Haruki, use your imagination. Haven't you ever actively pictured yourself finishing off the last serving of a side dish or a candy that you really like, in its entirety?"
"No, that's not something I do."
"How would you feel, then, if someone suddenly said to you, 'Make do with half'?"
"If the other person were really in need, I would give it to them without thinking twice."
"No way… It's my last one, so why should I only be able eat half of it? I refuse to accept such an unreasonable world."
"What's unreasonable here is your series of assertions…"
"I don't care what you say. I'm not giving you this. If you have any complaints, you can go buy something yourself at a kiosk."
"Fine, fine… I'm going shopping for a bit."
"Oh, while you're at it, get me five more of these chocolate bars."
"…You are so…"

Yes—there was no tension in his expression, no seriousness…

It told, even more eloquently than words, of how the two of them had lived in this country, full of contentment, repeated unchanging days, all the tedious hustle and bustle.

"Hey, Kazusa."
"Hm?"

And so the two of them continued sitting next to one another in the airport lobby, killing time by stuffing their cheeks with hamburgers, chatting back and forth, and watching the planes take off, one by one…

And, at last, the time came for the airport announcement to call the name of their own flight.

"Are you nervous?"
"Of course not."

Haruki murmured in a slightly meek tone, different from how he had been speaking up to this point.

But Kazusa remained the same, lightly fending off the question with an attitude that lacked any fragment of seriousness.

"This trip isn't for a concert or an interview. It's completely open, so we can make the most of doing whatever we want."
"I guess you're right…"
"So, does that mean *you're* nervous, Haruki?"
"I dunno…"

In spite of Kazusa's usual attitude, Haruki didn't relax his own change in mood.

This trait, not reading along with one another's state of mind, was a point that really had not changed for either of them since back then.

"I never thought we would go back there again, so, to be honest, I really don't know how I'm going to feel when I'm facing it."

Yes—nothing had changed.

Since several years ago, when they ceased reading the air, ceased their accord with society, and chose a sweet hell for themselves.

Threw away those they loved.

Threw away those who had loved them.

Threw away the country where they were born.

Since several years ago, when they wished to live simply according to their own desires.

"How you're supposed to feel when you're facing it? That's obvious."
"What am I supposed to do, then?"
"*Dooo yooou…. swear to looove… Kazusa Toumaaa… now and forever?*"
"Huh?"
"Feel worried stiff, trying not to laugh, while you answer some American priest who can hardly speak a word of Japanese. That's what."
"…Pff, hahaha…"

They destroyed their surroundings.

Threw so many people into sorrow.

Even hurt themselves, terribly.

And, at last, they had acquired this tiny daily life for themselves.

…This truly inconsequential everyday life, the scraps that remained after they traded their whole world away.

"If you're laughing *now,* I'm seriously concerned about what's going to happen in the actual moment."
"Ha, hahaha… No, but… Are we seriously doing that?"
"Mom at least said that she's got a chapel pinned down, at least."

And this world that they had thrown away—what it gave them, once again, in their inconsequential routine, was a routine of even further calm and quiet.

They hurt that world.

And yet, that world revived on its own, and they were saved by it.

Received a favor that they could never fully pay back.

Gave up on returning it, since they knew there was nothing they could do.

"Snrk… No, I'm doomed. I'm definitely gonna laugh. I'll be full-on cackling."
"You… If you really do laugh, I'm kicking you right up into the air."
"Come on, Kazusa, you can't be serious?"
"What, is there a problem?"
"You were the one grumbling and groaning about, 'We've already entered our family register, so having a ceremony at this point would just be a hassle.'"
"B-but this is what Mom wants."
"Huh."
"Are you telling me you would disdain this one tiny, modest wish from our mother? Are you truly such a heartless man?"
"Hmmm."
"…What's with these reactions? What are you trying to imply?"
"Nothing, it's just… You don't seem opposed to the idea at all."
"What, are *you* opposed? …To holding a ceremony with me?"
"I'm a man. I have the right to answer pointless questions like that with, 'How am I

supposed to know?'"
"Oh, wow, I see. Boys are an especially infuriating sort of beast, huh."
"And why are you being so open today? You do realize we're not in bed right now?"
"Haruki, you… You've really been a lot more blunt lately, I've noticed."
"Well, that's because I have to spend my life with someone who's so nonchalant and unreserved."

For Haruki Kitahara and Kazusa Kitahara, airports held a great many memories.

Breakdowns, declarations of feelings, separations, returns home, and new journeys.

Casting aside, spilling, overflowing, reawakening…

Countless pains slept in Narita, that airport in Japan.

And, today, for the first time in years, the two of them were going toward that place.

Toward Narita Airport.

They would set foot upon Japanese soil once more.

They would return to that strong, gentle, and just slightly meddlesome world.

To swear before everyone that the two of them would be a pair forever.

They would swear anywhere, at any time, however many times it took.

"Well, it looks like the gate has opened up, so let's get going."
"I wonder if Mom's doing all right."
"For now, she's out of the hospital and living at home, she said."
"I see… I wonder if she'll finally come and visit us here next time, then?"
"She herself said, 'I don't want to leave Japan.'"
"It's better to be with family, right? That seems obvious."
"I never imagined I would hear those words out of you…"

Winter was no longer White Album season.

The snow was neither crystalized tears, nor drops of sorrow.

"Let's go, Haruki! To Japan!"
"Yes, to our homeland… Let's go back."

With no thought for their age, no sign of just going through the motions, their arms tightly entwined…

The two of them, pressing their bodies against one another, began walking toward the boarding gate.